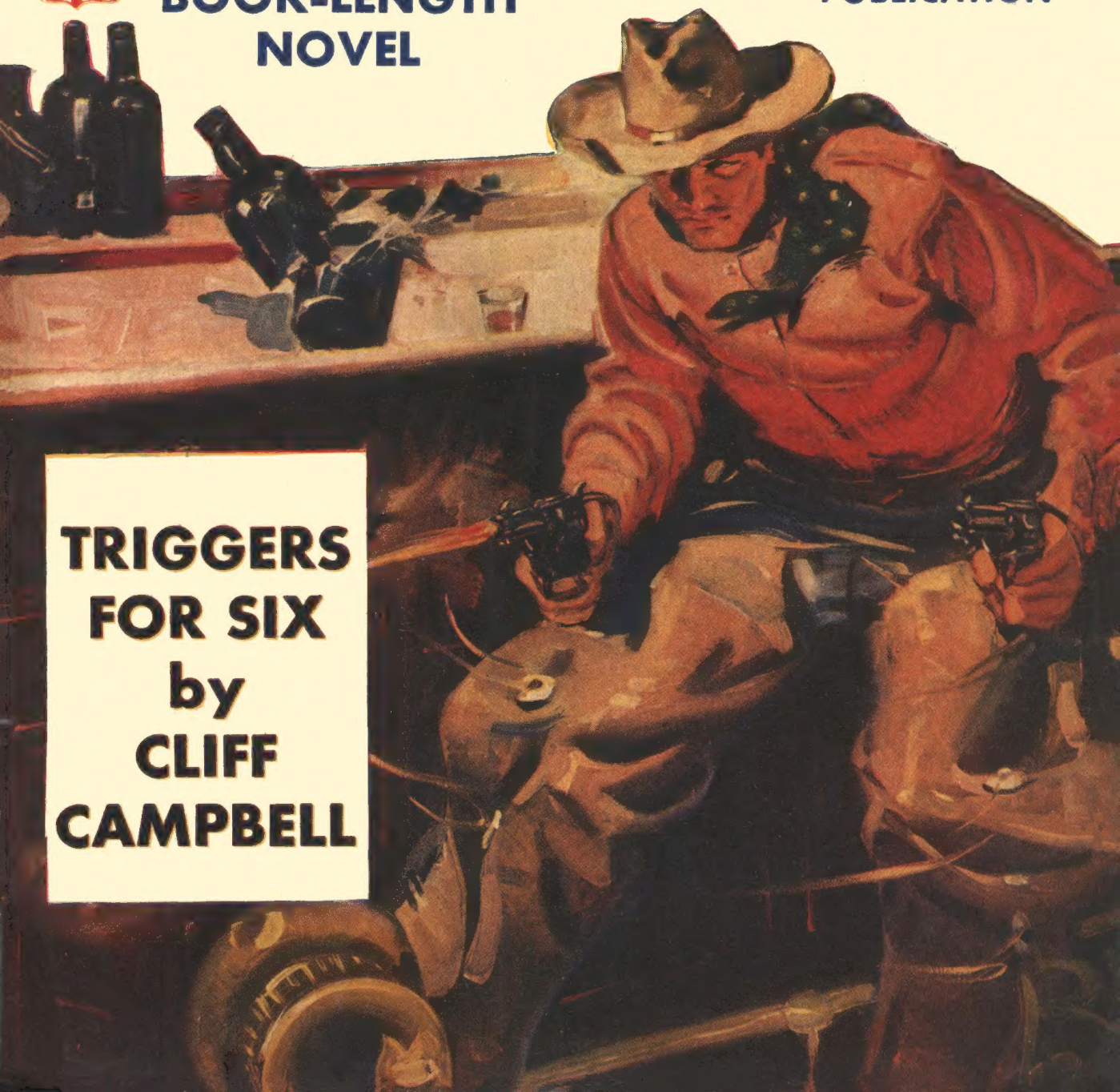
SEPT.

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

BUY UNITED STATES DEFENSE BONDS AND STAMPS

A COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

FIRST MAGAZINE PUBLICATION



TRIGGERS FOR SIX

by CLIFF CAMPBELL

FOOT ITCH
ATHLETE'S FOOT

WHY TAKE CHANCES?

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ, whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show that H. F. will kill the germ Tinea Trichophyton within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin, which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. every night until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer?

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PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED

Send Coupon

At least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

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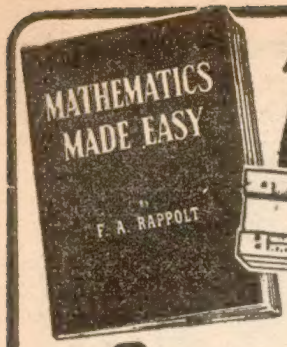

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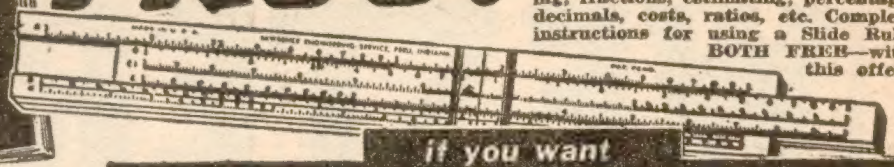

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

Vol. IX, No. 2 *September, 1942*

A COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

TRIGGERS FOR SIX ..... **Cliff Campbell** **10**

When Jake Miller's S.O.S. brought Haywire Haynes back to the town he'd known as a boy, Haynes found that everyone remembered him. Only he knew danged well that he'd never met any of these alleged "schoolboy pards" before. This much he knew: old Jake had struck it rich, and uncovered the fabulous Lost Dutchman mine. Jake never was a hand to keep his mouth shut, so that added up to owlhoots and bushwhackers from all over the West snaking their coyote claws into the game. And Haynes soon found that it was no flimsy setup these polecats had: no sooner had he indicated that he was wise to their game, drygulch bullets started whining and a corrupt court of justice began framing a hangman's noose for him! An action-packed, suspense-ridden novel you'll long remember!

A SMASHING NOVELET

SIX-GUN EDITOR ..... **Paul Poynton** **85**

They needed a fire-eating newspaper in that town, because renegades were framing up bloody warfare between Red man and White. Leif Ericsen knew that, and came with six-guns and blazing editorials to make and keep the peace!

SHORT STORIES

DEATH TRAILS THE CARVER STAGE ..... **Archie Joscelyn** **73**

As soon as Bill Carver saw Pearsall's crooked transports riding along the Carver-Bleeker lines, he knew that dirty work was afoot—and found that his partner had sold him out. But Bill knew how to handle such business—only he didn't know that there was still a constant passenger on the few remaining Carver stages: Death!

THROUGH HELL TO BREAKFAST ..... **Lee Floren** **99**

Todd Price had to choose between drygulching his best friend, or being exposed as one of the owlhoots who had held up the Limited. But he didn't know that, whichever choice he made, his future had already been framed for him—in Boothill!

A WESTERN FACT ARTICLE

THE COYOTE ..... **Kenneth P. Wood** **81**

Seems as if they made a mistake when they chose the Buffalo to typify the wild life of the West; there's a much more deservin' critter, as the gentleman herein explains!

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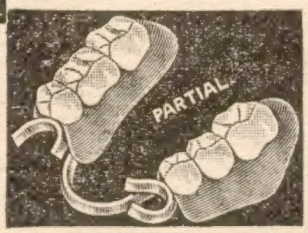

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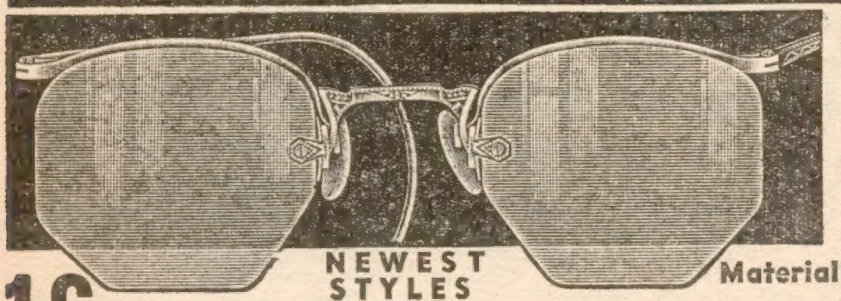

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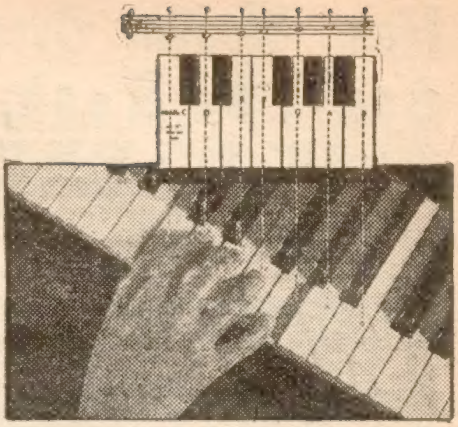

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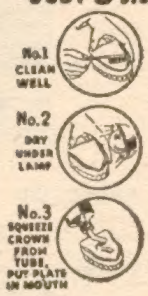

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TRIGGERS FOR SIX

by CLIFF CAMPBELL

A Complete Action-Packed Book-Length Novel

FIRST MAGAZINE PUBLICATION

When Haywire Haynes got that letter from old Jake Miller, he knew something was wrong. Old Jake had struck it rich, and every owlhoot in the West had his claws trimmed to get a hold on that fabulous lost Dutchman mine. And Haynes found himself plunged into a setup that must have made Satan himself envious for the sinister cleverness of it—found himself the center of whining bullets and the machinations of corrupt lawmen!

CHAPTER I

"HOWDY, pardner!"

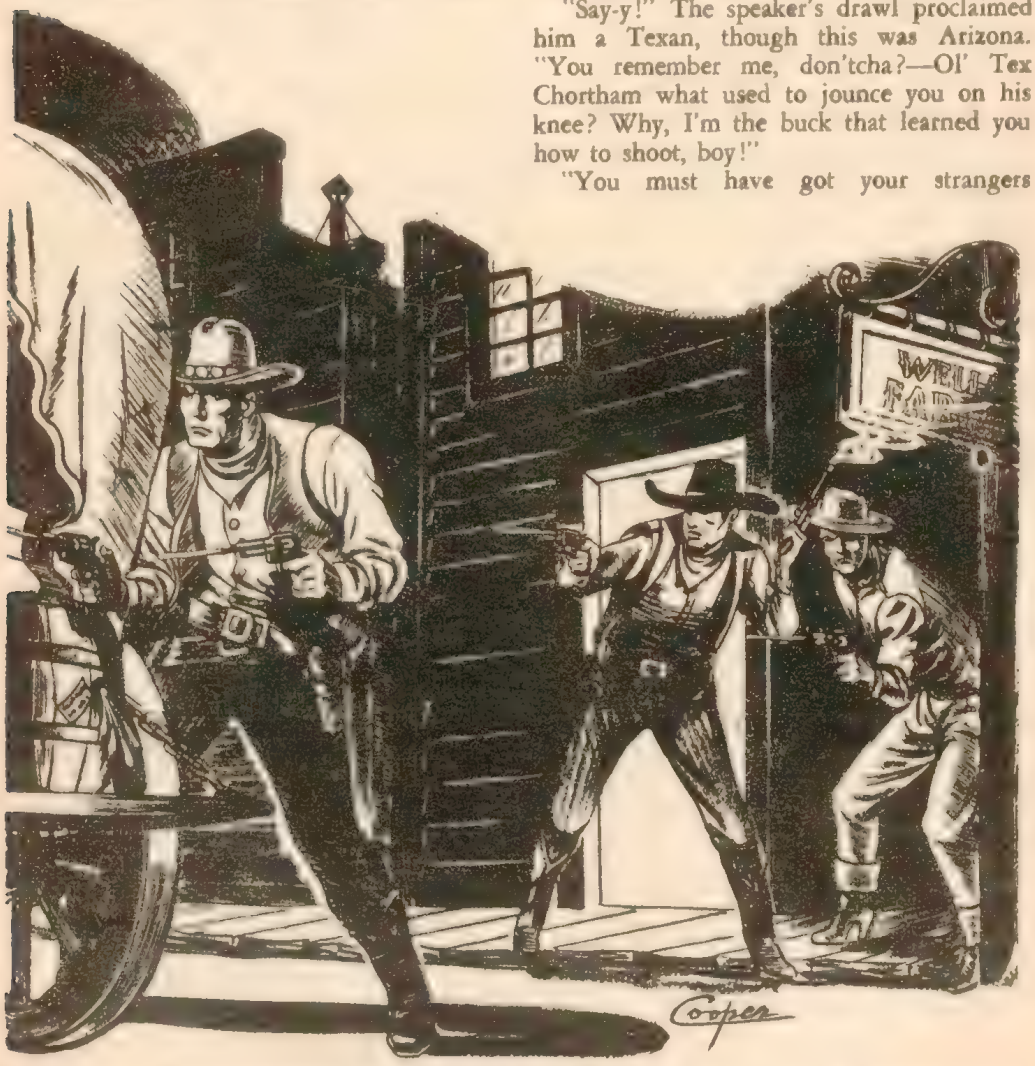
Haynes turned, a tall levi-legged man in a brush-scarred vest and a horse-thief hat with a hole through its crown.

The speaker, a rawboned fellow with a scoop-shaped jaw, grinned hugely. "You sure fooled 'em, boy—they been layin' odds you'd never make it! But I told 'em. I said you'd git here; I said, 'That guy would charge hell with a bucket!"

Haynes smiled enigmatically. "Right obligin' of you," he said; but made no move to grasp the proffered hand.

"Say-y!" The speaker's drawl proclaimed him a Texan, though this was Arizona. "You remember me, don'tcha?—Ol' Tex Chortham what used to jounce you on his knee? Why, I'm the buck that learned you how to shoot, boy!"

"You must have got your strangers



In a moment, Haynes realized that this was a trap; he fired coolly, and the lantern-jawed man fell back, but there would be more than these two...

mixed," Haynes told him quietly. "Never laid eyes on you before in my life."

It was not an auspicious beginning, but Haynes was not the sort to let a man mislead himself. "'Fraid you've got some other buck in mind," he said with a whimsical smile intended to absolve the remark of animus. "You couldn't possibly have jounced me on your knee."

Some of the incredulity passed from Chortham's glance, leaving a kind of puzzled wonder in its place; a wonder gradually sharpening into a look of completest bafflement. He shook his head as though to clear something from his mind. "How's that?"

"Because," Haynes said, "in my knee-jouncin' days, we never had no neighbors but the Pimas, an' I'd swear you ain't no Injun."

"No," Chortham frowned, "I ain't no Injun—"

"Then if you'll excuse me," Haynes said blandly, "I'll just get about my business"; and off he strode, leaving Chortham scowling after him.

Haynes' business craved a post office, and this, he judged, would be found in one of the stores. It was just possible, he thought, Old Jake might have left some further word for him. Jake was such a batty-minded cuss, he might have done 'most anything. Still, he was cunning enough in some ways; and that cunning, under the circumstances, might have served to make him cautious. God knew there was need for caution if what Jake had said were true!

But he'd better take a look, Haynes thought; and headed up the street.

A stranger to his own home town, he gazed about him curiously as his half-boots clumped the new board walk that, filled with jostling people, lurchingly angled toward Fish Canyon as it sought to flank the tall false fronts of buildings Haynes had never seen before. Fourteen years can make a lot of changes; and Greaterville had changed—had grown. Haynes was not quite certain he liked it. The place had lost its elbow room, was cramped and jammed and turbulent; there was no peace in it anyplace. This was what raw gold could do.

He recalled it as it had used to be; seven-eight sun-warped shacks sprawled round an adobe store; a habitat of heat and silence that only occasionally knew the shout of man and other times lay drenched in the monstrous stillness of the rock-ribbed Santa Ritas whose downflung evening shadows had so enraptured him as a boy.

Now even these were changed, their solitude shattered by the ringing pick blows of the grubbers, their evening serenity ripped and rent by the carousals and lusty brawling of these outlanders whose very number was a curse no board walk could accommodate, and trickles of them were left slopping over into the street among the swearing horse-backers and clattering wagons lurching in and out of ruts and hurling the choking dust hat high.

The old adobe store still held its place here anyhow, he saw; though the garish sign swung across its front bespoke the general change and told of the new man running it—a Yankee more than likely. "Sanford Tatum," the sign said. "Gen. M'dise., U. S. Post Office, Greaterville, Arizona."

With a grimace, Haynes passed inside.

About as he'd remembered, save for the greater abundance of goods piled helter-skelter. The same commingled odors came to tease his senses—the acrid tang of soap and coal-oil, coffee smell and the pungence of blackstrap sorghum; lard and tallow smells and the fragrance of ginghams and calicos. The light was still poor and the place just as cluttered as when Obe Krummer had run it. For a second, nostalgia threatened to shunt Haynes onto a side-track; then he was joining the restless line of men scuffing boots impatiently this side of the big grilled window.

POSTMASTERS were all alike—gab, gab, gab! If the average citizen tried conducting his affairs in like manner, Haynes thought, there would not be jails enough to hold the debtors. He gathered this one's name was Tatum, and guessed likely he was the Tatum named on the sign. With his sunken cheeks and great hooked beak, bald head with its fringe of hair lapping over a dirty collar, he looked more like a frowsy old buzzard than anything else Haynes could think of.

One of the men was telling him about a recent shooting. Some Indian named Chico apparently had pistoled to death a miner named Moore; Moore had been drunk and threatened to cut the redskin's belly out. "I dunno what we're goin' to do with these damn Injuns," Tatum declared. "Thievin', murderin' outfit from first to last."

"We ought to plant the lot of them," the fellow he was talking to growled. "They've

got a new shenanigan now—stealin' stock from freighters an' returnin' it for two to eight dollars per head! By God, we ought to boil them bucks in hog fat!"

Haynes wasn't greatly interested in Indian depredations. It had been his experience that, if left alone, they were generally pretty easy to get along with. He held little sympathy with the general notion that the only good Indians were dead ones. For the hundredth time he dug Old Jake's letter from his pocket. It was brief, vague and ominous:

Greaterville
Dec. 17, 1874

Dear Hank:

Better you had come back here. I haff struck it rich. Maybe I giff you haff if I ain't got killed first. Geep your nose clean und don't pick any daisies.

Jake Miller.

Haynes frowned thoughtfully as he put the letter away. That "if I ain't got killed first" didn't sound so durned good nohow; not even considering that Old Jake had been expecting someone to kill him as long as Haynes had known him. Right after the War, Old Jake and his nephew Jerry, who had served in the Confederate Army, had skipped off into Mexico out of fear of Union vengeance. That had been where Haynes had met them, well into the hills of Sonora where he'd been rodding a syndicate cattle spread and prospecting a little on the side. He'd got Jerry loose from some Yaquis and Jake had pledged undying gratitude. Haynes had laughed it off, but Jake had been very earnest. "Yah! You vait and you vill see," he'd said. "I vill make you rich some days!"

But Jake Miller had the unhappy faculty of getting himself into trouble. Within the month, Haynes had pried him out of another scrape and then had completely lost sight of him; this letter was the first word he'd had of the old Dutchman in years. He'd about been fed up with trying to raise cows in Sonora when Jake's letter had reached him last month, and the postmark "Greaterville" had proved the deciding factor.

He looked around. The line had grown; there were four men back of him now; and as he looked, the fourth man's eyes lighted up with delight and astonishment. "Well, damn my eyes if I ain't peerin' at Haywire Haynes!" he cried, thrusting out a hand. "H'are you, fella?"

This was coming it pretty thick, Haynes thought, grinning wryly; two of them inside of a quarter hour. Looked like the reception committee was working over time. He took the man's hand, shook it briefly, wondering how he'd got acquainted with that handle folks had fastened on him as a boy from his habit of doing the unexpected; wondering, too, how the man had recognized him after fourteen years of being away from here. "Seems," he said whimsically, "like I'd ought to remember you—"

"Sure!" said the big man, black eyes twinkling. "You remember me—Bill Graham that used to go to school with you? Lord! The fights we've had! An' that dance—" He chuckled. "'Member that dance at Tombstone when—"

"Shucks," Haynes drawled, "of course. As if I could forget a thing like that!" He smiled abruptly, a quick and twisted smile; for he knew the man was lying. All the schooling he'd ever had, had been got at his mother's knee. But the entire store seemed to be hanging on his words, so he said in the careless manner of the time: "Powerful glad to've met up with you again, Bill. What you doin' these days?"

"OH—" Grahan told him, staring oddly, "this an' that. Anything to make ends meet. This camp is rich as Croesus, but it takes a Croesus to live here. My Gawd! The prices these carpetbaggin' merchants are askin' for their knick-knacks! When'd you get back, Hank?"

"Just got in—"

"Got fixed up for a room yet? No? The Antler House is your meat then—little crowded right now an' higher than a kite, but I reckon they'll fix you up—I'm pretty good friends with Vic. I'll take you 'round and introduce you."

Haynes murmured his thanks and, finding himself at the window; said: "Anything there for H. A. Haynes?"

Tatum, frowning, picked up a batch of mail. "First name?"

"Hank," Haynes said; "or mebbe Henry—"

"Or might be Haywire," Graham said, chuckling. "Still callin' you that, Hank?"

"A few," Haynes said, hanging onto his temper. He was not the world's most patient man, but what he lacked in this respect, he more than made up for in determination. He did not consider these attempts to make his acquaintance things of happen-chance coinci-

dence. They were definite, calculated moves; part of a fixed, premeditated pattern that had for motive power some sinister design. A design, moreover, Haynes suspected, which had more than a little to do with that note in his pocket from Jake.

" 'Hank Haynes, Esquire,' " Tatum read through his steel-rimmed spectacles. With a scowl at Graham he pushed the envelope through the grill—an envelope, Haynes saw, that had somehow come unstuck. He looked at the postmaster narrowly, but Tatum was going through the G's and affected not to notice.

Haynes, about to call his attention to it, abruptly changed his mind. Stuffing it in a vest pocket back of his Durham, he stepped aside. The line moved forward. "Nothin' for you!" Tatum snapped at Graham, and the big man laughed. "C'mon," he said, linking his arm through Haynes'. "Let's get over to the Antler."

Haynes offered no objection. He had to put up someplace.

The Antler House, when they reached it, came as something of a surprise. It was not at all the sort of dive he'd been expecting. Spacious lobby, deep rugs on the floors—large oil paintings, gave it a quiet opulence that went in harmony with the good cigar smoke of its barroom and the suavely courteous mien of the white-aproned gent who took their orders. Haynes looked around in appreciation. This was not frontier tradition; it smacked of Tombstone's Crystal Palace—the Alhambra or Oriental. No tough monkeys bellied its ornate bar; no hobnailed boots scratched the shining grass of its footrail. This was class, with a bartender displaying an ability at mixing things.

Bill Graham grinned. "Not bad, eh?" he said, and chuckled. "This camp's mákin' history, Hank. In a year it'll outclass Tombstone—make Nogales an' Tuscon look like dumps. I tell you, this town is goin' to grow. We're right in the heart of the cattle country; we'll get the bulk of its business. There's wagon trains comin' in every day with lumber from the Cherrycows. We got a stageline makin' Benson, Bisbee, Fort Huachuca, Tucson, Lordsburg—even towns across the border. Sure, they're stuck up occasionally an' there's talk of puttin' in stamp mills an' castin' the bullion into two-hundred pound bars like they do the silver at Tombstone so the roadagents can't lug it off—but what of that? Like the sportin' element, the bandits go wherever there's good takings. Got to expect that—part of the game. But there's a future here for the guys that's got a little—" He broke off grinning sheepishly. "Hell, I'm talkin' like a meetin' of the town council— No matter; wait an' see! There's somethin' about this town gets into your blood!"

HAYNES smiled dryly. He was willing to concede something about the town might get into it; but it wouldn't be the knives this guy and Chortham were so blandly sharpening. Let Graham take him for a sucker—he'd be all the quicker finding out what kind of game was afoot; that there was a game he now felt certain and would have bet his shirt it was someway hooked to the trouble Jake had hinted of in his letter.

"Well, let's go find Vic Stanislau," Graham said presently, setting down his glass; so off they went, Haynes making mental note of Bill Graham's standing as implied by the fact no money had changed hands for the several drinks just downed.

"Swell guy, Vic—you'll like him," Graham said, leading off down a carpeted corridor. "Knows everyone an' travels with the brass collar dogs."

"Kingpin here in Greaterville, eh?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that; but he sure does get around. There's one buck you want to steer clear of, though," said the big man, frowning. "San Tatum. He's a slick-talkin' carpetbaggin' Yankee, an' he's got his paws in everything; runs the post office, runs the Marshal, runs a good thick chunk of the business. He's slipprier'n slobbers an'll do you a meanness if you don't see eye to eye with him."

"You sound," Haynes observed, "like he'd done you one."

"Mebbe he has," Graham answered. "You take my advice an' stay clear of him if you want to keep in good health."

"Boss of the hard-case element, eh?"

"Just keep clear of him," Graham muttered darkly, "or you'll find out. He's the kind would eat out of the same plate with a snake. 'Hey—what you waitin' on?"

But Haynes paid him no attention.

A door they'd been passing was partly ajar, and Haynes stopped dead in his tracks, was staring through the opening with a cold frost bright in his eyes. What he saw was none of his business and he'd plenty on tap already. But, pushing the door back gently, he said with bell-steel in his voice:

"Would you be wantin' that hombre removed, ma'am?"

CHAPTER II

SHE WAS backed against a table, frightened eyes dilated, lips twisted away from teeth in a scream that would not come. Towering over her was a tall man in the garb of a professional gambler whose face until just now, had been flushed with drink and excitement. Turned still by Haynes' drawled words, the gleam of sadistic amusement slowly faded from his stare, was repaced by a look of craft. His turning was a careful thing, but no amount of care could keep the venom from his cheeks.

"What was that?"

Haynes ignored him—or appeared to. Disregarding Graham's growled protests, he stepped inside the room, stepped softly like a cat; and to the girl he said again: "Would you be wantin' him throwed out, ma'am?"

As with an effort she pulled black eyes around to stare at him; eyes that seemed surprised to find him standing there and that even yet were dull with the shock sustained by knowledge of the man's intentions. The breath she took was half a sob and a kind of shudder swayed her slender body as she fell back against the table.

When it became apparent she was in no shape to answer questions, Haynes swung his attention to the man and a col' rage put white edges of compression about his mouth. Gray as smoky sage, his eyes showed the effort he was making to keep himself in hand, and the sound of that effort was thickly in his voice. "I didn't know," he said, "there were any polecats of your stripe around this country."

The man's cheeks went deeply red; went dark as fury grabbed him. One long-fingered hand shot beneath his coat.

"Go on, you tinhorn—drag it!"

"For Gawd's sake!" Graham cried jumping forward. "You don't savvy who you're talkin' to—"

"It may only have two legs," Haynes drawled, "but I'm talkin' to a skunk."

Graham choked. He grabbed for Haynes' arm—caught it; hung on frantically. "You haywire fool! That's Stanislau—Vic Stanislau! Do you understand? My friend!"

"Your friend ain't displayed much regard for your reputation," Haynes said coldly. Like the lash of a whip his voice struck across at Stanislau: "Let go of that gun or use it!"

Stanislau's face was white as his stock. The will to murder had been in his look, but Haynes' cold drawl had cracked it. The hotel man's face was ugly with the battle being fought between desire and the dictates of judgment. Caution finally won, for he brought the hand out empty. But his stare was bright with malevolence and there was the promise of a future accounting in the wicked slant of his cheeks.

If Haynes was recalling what Graham had told him of this man, it seemed not to be exerting any great amount of influence. "The lady's waiting, Stanislau."

Rage burst out of Stanislau in a reckless curse. "If you're expecting to see me bow an' scrape to any cheap back-alley strum—" He stopped abruptly, took a half step backward, with his mouth peeled back from teeth in a cry that got hung up in his throat as his eyes slewed away from Haynes'.

Haynes' smile touched the girl very briefly. "It seems plain Mister Stanislau mistook you, ma'am, for what he thought was a kindred spirit. I expect he's so overcome with regret is why he's takin' so long to apologize—but he's intendin' to. That's right, isn't it?" he inquired of Stanislau.

The face of Graham's friend was mottled. The expression of it appeared to hold unusual interest for the stranger; his scrutiny was curiously intent, as though he were witnessing something he had never expected to look upon. Neither Graham nor the girl could perceive anything at all warlike or intimidating in Haynes' inspection, yet it appeared to be exerting a singular influence upon Mr. Stanislau's personality. He stood against the wall, uncertain, glaring sulkily into space and with the knees of his pegleg trousers visibly twitching.

"Of course," Haynes observed as though pondering the matter, "there's an alternative. But I don't believe," he smiled at Stanislau, "that you'll much like it."

WITH a bitter grimace, Stanislau swept a baleful look at the girl. "It's like he said," he managed to mutter. "I mistook you for somebody else—"

"An' you're mighty sorry," Haynes prompted. "Tell her."

Stanislau glared, cheeks dark with fury. It looked for a second like he meant to crowd his luck, meant to grab for that harness gun anyway.

The girl said quickly: "That's all right. He's said enough—"

"Not half enough," Haynes said. "When you get a coyote cornered—"

"Hell!" Graham growled disgustedly. "Ain't you carried it far enough? After all, she's only a—" He stopped at the look in Haynes' stare. "A Spaniard," he amended dryly.

"What's wrong with bein' a Spaniard? I've a lot of good Spanish amigos—"

"Hell, they're—"

"Salt of the earth," said Haynes, smiling. "Ain't that so, Mister Stanislau?" and Stanislau, scowling, nodded. "Cream of the crop," he said thickly.

Haynes swung his grin to the girl. "You see? He really did make a mistake, ma'am."

She said pleadingly: "Won't you let me go now?"

"Why, certainly—seguro si, senorita. You may leave any time you've a mind to." Haynes bowed with a cowman's gallantry. She hurried past him, almost running in her haste to get out of the room.

Haynes raked a glance at Vic Stanislau, grinned at the man's balked fury. Then, the swing of his shoulders plainly expressing his contempt, he strode to the door, the crowd in its rectangle giving way as he walked through it.

Outside he shot a quick look up and down the street. But the girl was gone.

He turned at the thump of boots and observed Graham coming after him. A displeased scowl was screwing up the big man's forehead. "Gawd sakes, come on—let's get some place where I can do some thinkin'," he said, glowering. "A fine mess you've made of things now! That guy coulda done more for you than all the rest of the squirts in this town put together!"

"Guess I can rack along."

Graham looked up at him quickly. "What you mean by that?"

"Just this: I don't need you nor any other crook to show me where to head in at. Any time you think different, flip your gun an' come arunnin'."

"Why, you goddam upstart cow flunky!" Graham yelled, and drove a haymaking left at Haynes' jaw.

There was a chorus of gasps from stopped men round them, yet before Graham's fist found flesh there was a report like a board striking water. It was the sound of Haynes' driven right exploding against Graham's chin; and the next thing Graham knew, he was flat on his back in a circle of shocked white faces.

CHAPTER III

A DAMNED fool thing to do, Haynes reflected when he'd cooled off sufficiently to think straight. Quite on a par with the other things done which had earned him that sobriquet of "Haywire." He'd got to learn to hang onto his temper! Antagonizing an influential buck like Stanislau had been entirely bad enough for one day; but to top that trick with the roughhouse he'd handed Graham was just like laying your smoke on a powder key—and he'd been going to play this smart!

"I sure ain't got but one wheel in my think-box," he muttered disgustedly as he finished surveying himself in the cracked mirror above the washstand. The room wasn't as comfortable or the walls as solid as the one he had seen at the Antler House; he'd aimed to stay there anyhow; but the clerk had seen things differently, no doubt having talked to Stanislau. So here he was in the Mining Man's Haven, a fourth-rate dump in Fish Canyon, half a mile beyond the town limits. And all the while he was cleaning his razor and getting the rest of the lather off his face, consideration of what he might have done kept a morose scowl between his eyes.

A few judicious enquiries had served to show him that Graham had not been lying when declaring Vic Stanislau to be a man well able to make his weight felt in this town. The man had his fingers in a good many local pies and a string on most of the others. Nor was the chunky Graham any man to shout boo! at, either.

Haynes had recalled by now where he'd heard of Bill Graham, and the recollection was not of a caliber to gild any further prospects. "Curly Bill" was what these grubbers called him; and "Curly Bill" was the cognomen of the country's toughest outlaw—a buck so salty that not even Tombstone's famous marshal, Wyatt Earp, had yet dared drag a gun on him.

Haynes' lips quirked a rueful grin as he recollected Curly Bill sprawled flat in the dust with his glazed stare combing the stars. Graham wouldn't take that meekly. He'd be damned soon hunting a scalp; and Haynes cleaned his pistol carefully while his mind played round with a notion.

Finally satisfied, he glanced at his mirrored reflection and, with a reckless cuff at his hat, strapped on the gun and went out.

HE RODE back into town with no very definite object other than a need to take on grub. This he did at a hashhouse, then strolled round taking in the sights. The place had discovered progress and new enterprises seemed springing up everywhere. He saw the new stage station, the two-floor adobe bank and the lawyers' offices over it; but saloons, honkytonks, cribs and assayers' cubbyholes were in the great majority and he wondered how so many managed to get a sufficient slice of the custom.

He kept his eyes skinned sharply, for both the black-haired girl and Graham; for Graham might shoot on sight and the girl had captured his interest.

She was like no one he'd ever known. Mex or Spanish certainly, but of a type to fire one's imagination with her strange dark eyes and that dash of midnight in her hair; even her voice—scared and husky as it had been—was of no ordinary timbre; more like a nightingale's, he thought, than like a person's. Even yet he could see that downsweeping flutter of lashes that had set his pulses racing. There was something wild, exotic about her—a disturbing something that played havoc with his emotions and upset the accustomed calm of his thoughts.

He wished that he might find her again, and prowled with that wish in mind. But tramp as he would, he could not come across her; and finally, dog-tired and saturnine, he bent his steps toward the livery where he'd left his horse.

He was passing a can-littered alley when the shot rang out. Instant reflex spun him slanchways to a crouch, gun out and lifted. But there was nothing to line his sights on; he had seen no flash. The alley loomed dark and silent, to all intents deserted. No sound rose from it that could be heard through the general din. But he had Graham's face in his mind and was clamping down on the trigger when a low groan came from back of him.

He turned like a cat, eyes glinting.

With a choking sob a man reeled out of a doorway, took a lurching step and pitched face down in the road.

Haynes' lips peeled back from his teeth. Did Bill Graham think him a greenhorn?

He'd just wait where he was and let someone else do the looking.

But no one else appeared interested. No sound came from the alley and no one came from the nearby buildings to see what that shot had signified. It was commentary on this town and on the custom of its denizens.

He debated the wisdom of crossing to that still and grotesque huddle. But environment was having its influence and caution bade him hold his hand. To those who called this country home he was an alien—an outlander; and as such, suspect. Caught bent over a dead man might get him accused of the killing—might even fetch him a party at the end of some jasper's rope.

A man with sense would keep clear away from what was sprawled face down in the road.

But even with the conviction, Haynes was straightening from his crouch. For twenty-three years he had followed a code whose maxims were well defined. He could not stand idly by while perchance yonder fellow lay dying. It was quite in the cards he was dead already; but Haynes' code demanded he find out, demanded that he cross to the man or acknowledge himself plain cur.

A swift look up and down showed the road—save for himself and that sprawled shape—deserted. This was not in the heart of town, not in the night-life lineup, yet it did seem a little queer there wasn't *anybody* around. You'd expect to see a drunk or two. But Haynes didn't. There wasn't anyone.

Crossing the dark road gingerly, Haynes paused beside the man. The night wind shouldered him roughly. Starlight showed the drygulch victim to be clad in the garb of a Mexican. A steeple hat lay near his head; a serape spilled folds across one shoulder, half obscuring the tipped-forward head.

Slipping gun in belt, Haynes stooped and, tugging the figure slightly, slid a hand beneath to feel if the heart had quit.

He might have grabbed a rattler, the way he sprang back, startled, cursing. It was all that saved his life, the involuntary quickness of that movement. A jet of flame tore the alley gloom and a slug bit past his cheek to bury itself in an adobe back of him. Fall of plaster pattered the din; then Haynes, a lean crouched shape in the dim gray night, was hurling himself aside with lifted pistol crashing out its challenge as

he drove shot after shot the howling length of that alley.

Choked with a wild hot anger, his fumbling fingers shoved fresh loads in the cylinder while his eyes stabbed the piled-up shadows.

"Senor!"

The gasp was faint, but it reached him; yet it did not turn him at once, for the rage churned up inside him was too fierce a thing to be shaken loose in a moment. Bad enough had it been a *man* that snake had tried to bushwhack; but it hadn't. It had been a girl's body Haynes had touched when he'd bent down to feel for that heartbeat; that knowledge was what had jumped him back in surprise as the drygulcher fired. Haynes' code demanded vengeance.

He was still crouched there, keening the murk, when his ears caught the thump of boots; a hurried, frantic pelting sound that told of the bushwhacker's flight.

AGAIN the girl's voice drove at him: "Quick, *senor!* We mus' *hurry!*"

The urgence of her tone got through to him, pulled him around to find her frightened but insistent. She was pointing toward the door from which short moments ago he'd watched her reel. "The lock—there is something wrong weeth it. See if you can break eet—"

"But your wound!" he cried. "You're hurt—"

"It is nothing! A scratch, *senor—Quick!* See if you can break eet!"

She pushed him into the doorway. He tried the latch but it would not budge. The door was a thick one, sturdy oak planks bound with iron.

"Never mind," she cried. "Use the gun!" He could hear the chatter of her teeth. "That pelado will bring the rest of them!"

With narrowing eyes, Haynes put the muzzle of his pistol against the lock and fired—fired again; and the door swung loose, unable longer to hold them back.

The girl slipped through like a lynx. Dragging him after her, she kicked the barrier shut, slammed a crossbar through the slots. She caught his arm then, panting.

"This way, *senor!*" Desperation was in her whisper, choked and brittle with boding it was; and before Haynes could put any questions, she was off, gone hurrying through the swirling black of an echoing patio from which Haynes' spurs cut tinkles of sound as he followed, hard put to keep up with her.

"Say, look—" he called. "You're all right now. That fellow—"

"You do not know them!" The harsh bitterness of knowledge put a file edge on her tones. "Madre de dios! They weel not stop at anything!"

Haynes was skeptical. "What are they after?"

She whipped around on the instant and he could feel the swift suspicion of her as she stood tense, peering up at him, the high stars making a pale blur of features he could not pick out. "You do not know?"

At least he knew that voice! His pulse beat faster as his mind played with the knowledge. Despite its sharp edge of mockery, that voice belonged to the girl he'd found struggling with Stanislau. He said: "After all, I'm a stranger around here, ma'am—"

But she wasn't listening. Already she'd gone melting into the darkness again. He jumped after her, determined not to lose her this time.

The solid bulk of a house wall loomed before him. He heard her tugging at a door, heard the squeak and squeal of its opening—heard the stifled sob that broke from her as the room's yellow light spilled out across her pantlegs.

Then he was beside her, staring over her shoulder while the message of that wrecked room lashed its turmoil through his mind. The place looked like a maniac had gone through it with a sledge. Broken and overturned furniture lay everywhere in windrows. Shattered glass and shards of crockery strewed the floor and there, face down with his head in a pool of blood, was a gray-haired man, very dead.

"Valgame dios!"

It was like a wail, that low squeezed phrase that crept between the girl's clenched teeth. She swayed and would have fallen had not Haynes, suddenly springing forward, caught her. She lay against him, trembling. Crushed lilac was the fragrance of her and the wild, clean smell of her hair got in Haynes' nostrils, rousing a forgotten hunger that turned him gruffly savage so that he whipped his hands away from her, locking them whitely back of him as she stepped clear, half turning to stare surprised at him.

He could feel the beat of her eyes but would not look lest sight of her in that

wild mood urge him to some rash impulse.

He heard the swish and slap of her trappings and looked to find her beside the gray one with his head pressed hard to her breast as her frail shape rocked with her grieving. "Ah, pobrecito—pobrecito. . ." It was like a chant the way she said it, with her dry-eyed glance gone fixed and far on an emptiness of desolation.

Haynes looked at the old man's bare, burned feet, at the knife hilt sticking from his side, and that cold rage came again to put its mark on highboned cheeks; to fan the sparks in his eyes again. His shoulders moved with a restless swing and the candles flared to the breath of violence that still hung heavy in this room as he crossed to the girl, briefly touching her.

"Your father, ma'am?"

She lifted eyes that didn't see him. "Tio Esteban—my father's brother." She said it simply as a child might have; no tears, no gesture. It made Haynes' throat burn the way those proud eyes stared into space. No wailing, no feminine tantrums or self-pity. She was a thoroughbred and made Haynes proud to know her.

HE WONDERED what she'd done to earn these things that had befallen her—Stanislau, the attempted bushwhacking, this brutal murder of her uncle. Thought of the bushwhacker called back to mind her wound and he said concernedly: "You're hurt, ma'am—hadn't you better let me see to it?"

She seemed not to have heard him. She had covered the old man with a serape pulled off the wall. She stood there by him staring off at some drear horizon of her thoughts; a lone and tragic figure that yet had risen above these things—that would not let them down her.

Who was she? What act of hers had set in motion the desires and lusts responsible for the malevolent turmoil that enmeshed her? What—?

But he would not ask; would not give the questions voice. If she deemed he had the right to know, she'd tell him in her own good time. Until that time. . .

He dropped his musing, abruptly aware that she'd been watching him; was regarding him yet. There was something odd, intent and probing in the fixity of her stare, something of desperation and suspicion—something of challenge in it that left him baffled and uneasy.

He attempted to reassure her. "If there's anything I can do—"

"Don't you think you've done enough?"

The tone of her words left their meaning in some doubt. While he was wrestling with it, boot sound made a clatter on the stone flags of the patio; and he whipped around, eyes bright, and with a hand splayed above his holster.

But the girl jumped forward, caught it. "No, no, senor! It is only Rodriguez—I know his step."

Haynes looked up quickly. It was in his mind this Rodriguez might be a jealous lover; but he found nothing in her face to support the notion and without comment he took the hand away from his hip and the girl stepped back. But the tension did not leave her and anxiety still edged her nervous glance.

It made Haynes wonder.

And then the man was in the doorway with the candlelight spilling across his dark flushed face. He was tall and gaunt with mismatched eyes that held a drunken leer, and with his shirttail half pulled out of the dirty cotton trousers carelessly rolled about his boots.

The leer fell out of his eyes and they sprang wide as he raked the room with a startled look that briefly touched the dead man and came to rest on Haynes with a scowl as his hand made the sign of the cross.

"Valgame dios!" he cried, and came limping into the room; and the look of his eyes turned ugly as his stare beat hard at Haynes' face.

The girl said quickly: "He had nothing to do with it, Rodriguez—"

"No?" He swung an accusing glare at her. "Por dios! An' how do you know so much?"

"I was with him; we came in together—"

"So?" Suspicion made an ugly rasp of Rodriguez' voice as he looked from one to the other. "Who is this hombre?"

Haynes thought it time to take a hand and told him. "The name is Haynes—H. A. Haynes. If it's any of your business," he added pointedly; and was surprised at the sudden tensing of the man's gaunt frame, at the swift exchange of glances that flashed between him and the girl.

Rodriguez' eyes turned crafty. He looked at Haynes. "How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long you have these name?"

Haynes stared. What was the fellow driving at? And the girl—she was staring at him funny, too. This was stacking up like the damnedest mess he had ever stepped into. What was the matter with these people anyway? Was the whole town batty? He said: "I've always had it—"

"I'm think you are the one beeg liar, hombre!"

"By grab," Haynes growled, "I'm—"

But the girl cried: "Wait!" and ran between them. With her back to the leering Rodriguez, with spread arms keeping him back there, she faced Haynes with flashing eyes. "You know El Senor Graham, no? The one call 'Curly Beel'?"

Haynes said, "I've met him—" and stopped, bewildered at the biting scorn he read in the changing look of her.

"Basta—enough!" declared Rodriguez savagely, and brushed the girl from his path. There was that in his stare which cocked Haynes' muscles; and he was tensing himself to reach for his gun when there came a clatter as of a door flung back and a churning rush of boots beat up the echoes of the patio.

Rodriguez wheeled with a smothered oath, grabbed a rifle from the wall and went down on one knee with its stock against his cheek and its shining barrel wickedly leveled at the door.

Urgent fingers gripped Haynes' arm and he turned to find the girl beside him. Her eyes flashed toward a window. "Go!"

Haynes held his ground, uncertain. "I think I'll stick around—"

"You fool!" Her eyes glared up at him stormily. "Do you want to hang for that?" and her free arm swung toward Esteban who was still beneath his blanket.

"It is the Sheriff, you think?"

"Do not argue!" she whispered fiercely. "Go!"

CHAPTER IV

SANFORD TATUM, who ran most things in Greaterville, according to Curly Bill Graham, stood with his back to the darkening window with his ox jaws clamped about the stump of a black cigar. Dusk lay on the land outside and the dagger peaks of the faraway Tucson Mountains, etched darkly blue against the twilight glow, would be thought a picture of rarest beauty to a man new come to the West. But Tatum was a Yankee—a "carpetbagging" Yankee, and as such found little of interest in the startling contrasts of a grotesque nature. The lights of distant Tubac began to wink as nearer objects one by one disappeared beneath unfolding night, and past the descending chaos of crags and gulches other lights pinpricked the dark of the distant desert floor; and still San Tatum stood there, horse teeth champing his gone-out weed.

With an abrupt and irritable gesture he tossed the butt at a nearby cuspidor and, crossing to a door, jerked it open and stuck his head out. A two-foot slice of the Crystal Mirror's bar showed through the opening as he growled, "Send Chortham in here." After which he closed the door, lit a pair of bracket lamps and ensconced himself behind the battered desk.

Tex Chortham came in; a rawboned man with a scoop-shaped jaw and a stilted, saddle-bound swagger.

"What have you done about Haynes?"

"Well," a wry grin tugged the Texan's lips; "not much of anythin'—yet."

"Not crippled, are you?"

"Don't reckon so."

Tatum's vulture stare went over the man uncharitably. "When I hire a man to do something, I like to consider it done. Know that, don't you?"

"Reckon I ort to; you've sure told me often enough—"

"Why ain't it done, then?"

Chortham hunched his shoulders, stood considering. "Hev y'u seen this fella?"

"Certainly. Came after his mail—"

"Give it to him?"

Tatum's brows shot up.

"I was thinkin'," Chortham mentioned, "that havin' opened it, y'u might of decided to keep it. Uncle Sam—case y'u ain't never noticed—has got a mighty stretchin' reach—"

"You talk like a fool," said Tatum testily, biting the end off a fresh cigar. He touched a match to it; filled the air with its fragrance. Through this haze he watched the Texan reticently. "It looks, my friend, like you've lost your grip."

Chortham's dark face carved a grin. "I'm allowin' it's your privilege to dispense with my efforts any time you've got a mind to."

Tatum, leaning back in his chair, ran the black cigar across his mouth. Silence and smoke fog hid away his feelings and were a warning in the way he put them between

himself and the watching Texan. Above the jut of that cigar, Tatum's slate-colored frosty eyes unblinkingly considered Chortham with a kind of Mongol fixity that neither slackened nor abated till Chortham shifted weight and pulled his shoulders from the wall.

Tatum said then gently: "There's a bottle in the cupboard and a glass over there on the washstand," and waited till the Texan got them, after which he mentioned: "Looks a little odd, don't you think, that Bill Graham—"

"Bill Graham," said Chortham bristling, "come off a damn sight worse'n I did! Your pet firecracker exploded in his face and mighty nigh blowed Bill's jaw off."

"Try it in English, will you?"

Chortham eyed him, swapped his chaw to the other cheek and sent spit at the cuspidor. "I said Haynes left Curly countin' stars—"

"Shot him?" Tatum looked startled.

"No," Chortham said; "but he might as well have. He hit Bill with his fist."

Mesquite roots crackled in the fireplace and brightening light sent its increased flare across the low-beamed ceiling, elongating Tatum's shadow against the opposite wall.

After a moment Chortham continued. "Befo' yu start dishin' orders, there's one more thing you better know. Old Man Boyero got his chips cashed in this evenin' an' they're framin' Haynes for the rub-out."

He grinned across his lifted glass at the look on Tatum's cheeks.

CHAPTER V

HAYNES, feeling pretty much the fool she'd named him clambered out the window. He did not cotton much to the manner of his leaving; but there didn't seem much else to do after the definite way she'd made it plain they preferred to be found without him.

The window gave on a tiny alley backed against one wall of the gulch. A place of deep-banked shadows, pooled gloom and sinister rustlings, Haynes peered around with narrowed stare. Finally, in a seep of starlight, he made out the dim bulk of a wagon hitched behind a dozing horse.

The crowd in Esteban's was creating quite an uproar; and it struck Haynes suddenly he would not be helping the girl out much if they chanced to glance out and spot him. He'd ought to be clearing out of here—but which way? These were all new houses since he'd lived in this part of the country; and fourteen years of wandering was no help getting his bearings. Knocking about from the headwaters of the Peace to the jungles of Pan-America was not at all conducive, he found, to a clear remembrance of Greaterville's topography.

But he'd better do something—and quickly.

He did.

As boot sound approached the window he got quickly into the wagon. Lifting the tarp from the edge of its load, he squeezed back among some packing boxes that held their places solidly as the timbers of a shaft. Idly wondering at their contents, he pulled the tarp edge down again, and none too soon, for a voice that seemed but a hand's breadth distant growled: "Hell, no—he ain't out here, Bill. Ain't nothin' out here but a half-asleep hawss an' a wagon."

Under the tarp Haynes grinned. "Close enough to shave by!" he reflected, then put his back to a packing case and tried to make some sense from the rumble of arguing voice sound that reached him as though sieved through a blanket. But all he could get for his trouble was the knowledge that Rodriguez was supplying most of the chin music demanded by Curly Bill's questions. He could not make out the questions and only a few fragmentary bits of Rodriquez' replies. But he guessed the Mexican had not let off his rifle for he'd caught no sound of shooting. Once he heard the girl's voice briefly; then, as he was pondering the advisability of departing from his covert, the crunch of boots on gravel told of someone's coming.

The wagon creaked to a mounting weight. A whip's end popped and Haynes' hideout jerked to rolling movement and, bracing himself, Haynes tipped his hat derisively to the receding sound of Curly Bill's voice.

He had no idea where the lumbering wagon might be taking him, but he hoped it was somewhere closer to the heart of town, because he'd just recalled that unsealed letter Tatum had forked over at the post office and a strong hunch told him it was high time he was reading it. It was addressed in Jake Miller's hentrack scrawl and it might well be, Haynes thought, that Jake had set a meeting place or had given him further instructions.

Abruptly the packing case put a hard rough edge against Haynes' head. Brake blocks squealed and the wagon stopped.

"Here goes," Haynes thought, and lifted an edge of the tarp. Voice sound and the turmoil of heavy traffic hit him like a quirt. They were in the heart of town, all right!

Oil flares, filtering weirdly through the billowing dust, threw red and flickering light across the rumps of sweating horses; across the mud-streaked sweating faces of laughing, cursing miners; across the painted cheeks of thin-clad girls who were hunting the crowd for trade. One fat old dame in front of a tent with a red lantern swung from its ridgepole was stridently bellowing the virtues of "my gals" and glaring murderously at the handsome pimp orating from a soap box before the flap of the tent next door. Cowboys from the nearby ranges were forking snorting broncs in and out of the rumbling lines of freight wagons; and the crack and snap of bullwhackers' whips provided miniature echo to the sullen thunder of dynamite and black powder being exploded by the hopeful boomers gophering the hills. Everywhere loomed the carnival confusion that inevitably follows a gold rush, and no one needed to tell Haynes there was hair on Greaterville's chest.

Hopping out of the wagon Haynes was preparing to go hunt his horse when a heavy hand laid hold of his shoulder. "Gotcha!" declared a voice not used to authority; and the hand flung him around to face a gun deep-jabbed in his belly. One look at that gold-toothed grin decided Haynes that here was no gent to play button with. Light winked back from the stars on his coat and kept Haynes quiescent while his gun was being lifted. "I'll do all the talkin'," the lifter told him. "All you got to do is walk. Start doin' it."

Three men looked up as the star-packer, shoving Haynes before him, came in and slammed the office door. He said above the outside rumble: "Right over there, boy—that's it; right up against the wall. You can start the chin music anytime."

THIS might be a frame-up or it might be straight. But it looked like a frame-up. Else what had brought Vic Stanislau here? And those two hard cases with him?

But Haynes looked at the marshal humorously. "What's the big idea?"

"This the fellow, boys?" and when the two hard cases nodded, the marshal looked at Haynes and grinned. "All right, start talkin'. Or we'll see can we beat it out of you."

Haynes showed a look of puzzlement; his eyes walked over them thoughtfully but showed neither fear nor worry. "Mind explainin' what it is you're honin' to hear me talk about?"

The lawman winked at Stanislau. "Tough customer." To Haynes he said: "You can start by tellin' how come you murdered him."

"Murdered who?"

"Do your killin' in wholesale lots?"

"Not on Wednesdays," Haynes drawled gently. "Who am I supposed to have killed; and who says so? When? Where?"

"I'll ask the questions—"

"Suppose you get busy then. I've got considerable to do tonight," Haynes mentioned.

"Oh! Climbin' up on your high horse, are you?" The marshal's face showed a cross-grained man, crafty and doggedly stubborn beneath his politician's mask of smiling urbanity. The toes of two holsters made black knobs below the skirt of his coat; and seeing these Haynes formed his own conclusions as the man stared back at him scowling.

"Not climbin' up on any horse. I'm merely standing on my rights as a free and independent citizen," Haynes said mildly. "You've implied I've murdered a man. I've a right to know who the dead man is, the circumstances in which you found him, and what—if anything—prompts you to believe I killed him. Is there anything unreasonable in that?"

The marshal glared. "That gab won't buy you nothin,' mister. Fancy talkers are a dime a dozen in this camp. Just leave off all the trimmings now an' tell us why you rubbed out Old Man Boyero—"

"Boyero?" Haynes said, frowning. "Who's Boyero?"

"I don't hold with greasers and I'll do the best I can for you. If you had a grudge against him, say so. But don't try to cover up, because the harder you make this for me the tougher it'll be for you when I stand you up front of a jury."

"I don't know what you're talking about.

I don't know anybody named Boyero," Haynes said, "and I haven't anything to cover up. You've grabbed the wrong man, Marshal."

"Don't try to come any of that stuff!" The marshal's roan cheeks showed anger. "I've got two witnesses right in this office that saw you crawlin' out of Boyero's window not half an hour ago—" There'd been more he'd aimed to get unloaded, but something in Haynes' look stopped him; Haynes' unexpected smile perhaps.

It was a cool and slightly mocking smile; a lean grin whipped on Stanislau as though they shared significant knowledge. It made the marshal look at Stanislau quickly, sudden doubt in the squint of his eyes. He said: "What's so goddam funny?"

Stanislau's lips half-opened, hesitated as his glance touched Haynes. The hotel man's tongue crossed the lower lip in a careful, considering gesture.

The marshal turned from him impatiently. To Haynes he growled: "You talk an' talk right now, bucko, or I'll put you where your talk won't count till the judge gets around next fall."

"Got a warrant?"

The lawman's look turned ugly. "I don't need no warrant! I'm the law in this town, fellow, an' I handle things like it suits me! You—"

"Just a minute," Vic Stanislau said, with his regard pinned hard on Haynes. "Hold up a second, Bat. I expect you have slipped, sure enough. These fellows of yours must be mistaken. This gent was in the Antler House bar having a drink with Bill Graham half an hour ago—has been there pretty near all evenin', now I come to think about it. I been tryin' to think where it was I'd seen him." He nodded emphatically, still with his calculant stare on Haynes. "That's straight, Bat. Reckon this fellow's a friend of Bill's—you better turn him loose."

Marshal Bat Galva's jaw bogged down like a gate with a busted hinge.

Haynes thought the star-packer would have a stroke, the way he stood there glaring with his roan cheeks all tied up in knots and his neck veins looking like bridge builders' cable.

"Wh-wh-why the hell didn't you say so in the first place," he demanded, "'stead of sittin' there like a clam?"

"It just came to me—"

The marshal muttered under his breath, rammed his fists down into his trousers and told the State's star witnesses gustily to get the hell out of his office.

Stanislau eyed Haynes blandly.

"Much obliged," Haynes told him; and took the pistol the scowling marshal was holding out to him. "I hope," the marshal grunted, "there's no hard feelin's—"

"None at all. Any guy's liable to make mistakes. If you're through with me now—"

"How long," interrupted Galva, "have you known Bill Graham?"

"Didn't he ever tell you how he used to carry my books home from school?"

The marshal's brows went up and he looked at Haynes suspiciously. But the outlander's face was sober. Nodding carelessly, he opened the door and went out.

Stanislau got up hurriedly. The act pulled a glower from Galva. "Stick around a bit. I want to—"

"Sorry, Bat. I'd like to. But you know how it is. Business is business an' I got a minin' deal on I come mighty near forgetting about. See you later," Stanislau said over his shoulder; and departed like a centipede had got him by the ankle.

Haynes had almost vanished in the crowd. The hotel man was breathing with an accustomed vigor when he finally caught him, laid a slowing hand on his elbow. "Not so fast—you travel like a house afire." He took a deep breath. "Where'll we do our talking? At the Antler bar or—"

"Talking?" Haynes' face showed astonishment. "What talking?"

Stanislau's eyes went darkly narrow. "You know damn well what talkin'! You gave me the nod back there and I talked you out of a—"

"Are you under the impression," Haynes said, "that I asked you to intercede for me? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

Stanislau looked at him, for one long moment, intently. "So that's it, eh?" He said it quietly—too quietly. But Haynes was not afraid of him; and when he said "You goin' to deal me in on this or ain't you?" Haynes threw back his head and laughed at him. And he was still laughing, loudly, when the hotel man in a fury went stamping off down the street.

"Don't ever let it be said," Haynes called, "you was never roped in for a sucker."

CHAPTER VI

HAYNES had left his horse at the O. K. STABLE & FEED CORRAL, but that wasn't where he found it. More than a hundred yards this side of the O. K.'s warped-plank edifice, he came to a stop with his breath sucked in and his hands knobbing up into fists. There—right there in front of him—tethered to the hitchrail fronting Tatum's Crystal Mirror Bar,was a white-stockinged buckskin—his horse!

Most any other gent would have gone hog-wild on the instant. For a moment it looked like Haynes would. Then he got himself in hand, and though the gray of his glance showed a curdle of smoke, he broke a lane through the milling pleasure-hunters and shoved his back up against the building. There, with arms grimly folded across his chest, he waited.

A horse was sacred property and a caught horse thief was buzzard bait; and that was what Haynes aimed to make of the squirt who came after this horse.

He had not very long to wait.

A trio of tipsy cowhands shoving noisily into the Crystal Mirror let the doors swing shut behind an emerging gent who went straight across the walk, ducked beneath the hitchrail and came up beside Haynes' buckskin. A tall and rawboned man with sultry eye and lantern jaw.

Maliciously, Haynes waited till the fellow's hand touched the horn and he was hoisting a boot to the stirrup. Then, calm as ordering whiskey, Haynes said: "Get your paws off that horse."

The lifting foot stopped in mid air. An instant of sudden quiet was broken by the startled dives for cover of every man within earshot. The lantern-jawed gent put his foot down carefully. He was turning when Haynes swung clear of the wall; and as though it were a signal, all hell came loose like an avalanche.

Something tugged Haynes' open vest. A leaden bee sang a hole through his hat and gun sound slammed its roar against the buildings as Haynes' big pistol bucked his palm.

The lantern-jawed gent, in the act of sliding under Haynes' horse, abruptly jerked, and with both hands clawing his gullet, went down like wheat in a thresher. Haynes, swapping ends like a dog-jumped cat, drove three swift shots that knocked one trigger-worker over the porch's end rail and tore the cartridge belt off another who, with a gurgled wail, hurled down his gun and sprinted frantically for the building's corner.

Haynes was lifting his gun for a final salvo when a man's scared voice cried: "My Gawd, Chuck! Them was Curly Bill's men! Quick—let's get to hell out of here!"

Haynes lowered the pistol with a lean hard grin. He was returning it to leather when a big hand caught him by the shoulder—spun him around. A squatty man faced him across a leveled shotgun with eyes that were bleak as granite. Negroid lips were folded back across yellowed teeth and his voice had a leaping rasp: "You're lookin' death right spang in the eye—just blink an' I'll see you planted!"

CHAPTER VII

HAYNES read murder in the squatty man's face and did not argue with the reading. For a long cold moment, with his spine tense, tingling, he kept absolutely still while gun sound faded and the street went hushed with awe.

Then calmly, curiously, even, his tranquil glance played across the short man's countenance, took in the black and drooping mustache, the shallow flatness of the eyes deep-sunk beneath scowling, chalky brows. He had an impression of having met this man before but could not recall the occasion. The fellow's hands were whitely cramped in their grip of the leveled Greener; but a hard grin showed Haynes' teeth abruptly and his soft drawl held amusement. "Brother," he said, "you look a mite peeved. Somebody steal your stickpin or lift the watch fob off your chain?"

The man's cheeks darkened ominously. "Somebody's goin' to put a window through your breadbasket, hombre, if you don't do like I tell you. Grab the air by your ears an' grab it quick before I ventilate you proper."

With a lazy smile that had fooled better men than this one, Haynes put up his hands. "You ort to get made a example of," declared the shotgun holder malevolently. He glared at the swelling audience. This crew had bolted like partridges at the first faint whiff of violence, but now like avid buzzards they came winging back, each

anxious for a look at the drawling outlander who had singlehandedly taken on three of Curly Bill's tough hombres and was still afoot to tell of it.

"Perchance," Haynes said, "a gentlemanly exchange of handles might clear the atmosphere a little. Haynes is the name my forefathers packed—you can call me 'Hank' for short."

Whatever had been in the squatty man's mind, that thought was not there now. Mention of Haynes' identity had changed the slanting of his features and craft had made a foxy line of the mouth behind his mustache. "I'm Tolliver—deputy marshal. An expert with a shotgun." He mentioned the fact suggestively and pale sparks swirled behind the flatness of his stare. "We've heard of you quite frequent—of your antics below the Border. Don't think," he added grimly, "you can pull them didos around here. This town ain't used to violence. Lawbreakers ain't wanted in this locality, Hank; so turn yourself around an steer them Hyer boots towards yonder 'dobe. We got a jail for peace-disturbers an' you ain't no better'n any the rest of these slip-shootin' hellions. March!"

Haynes hung back a moment pondering. Looking up he said: "Ain't you goin' to take my gun?"

"What for?"

"Well. . .ain't it a sort of tradition—"

"You been carryin' that smoke-wagon quite a spell; I guess a few seconds longer won't hurt you any. I ain't scared of it, if that's what's latherin' you up so." Tolliver grinned at him sourly. "I been countin' your shots, boy. Mosey."

"What! Back again?"

Bat Galva looked up with a scowl. "Who you been saltin' down this time?"

There was a certain amount of forced jocularity in the marshal's tone; for after all, a friend of Curly Bill Graham's was no guy to be handled roughshod. But all pretense at humor washed off when Tolliver said, ticking them off on his fingers: "Wake Bannorbin, Joe Tularosa an' mebbe Short River Shaunnicy likewise—I ain't made sure of him yet—he ducked but I expect he's punctured."

Bat Galva eyed Henry Haynes with a changing look that spoke volumes. You could see him mentally peeling off the gloves and the cut of his jowls was a warning.

"So!" he said; and looked Haynes over carefully. "You're quite a hustler, ain't you? Must of forgot how Bill used to carry your books, shootin' up Bill's friends like that. Looks like I ain't the only guy mistaken around these sections. Go on—let's hear your story. Better take his popgun, Clem."

"It's empty. Let 'im keep it. Make 'im feel more at home."

"Now look," Haynes told them seriously; "a joke's a joke—but even a good one can be carried too far. I come into this country peaceful as a lamb. I didn't go lookin' for trouble—I never do. A guy named Chortham tried to scrape acquaintance. I'd no more than got him out of my path than up steps this smilin' Bill Graham who worked my flipper like a pump handle, tellin' me all the time what swell friends we used to be; remindin' me how we used to go to school together. He insists I get a room at the Antler; takes me over to put me in solid with this Stanislau pelican. After supper I mosey around a bit takin' in the sights. All of a sudden, for no reason I can think of, up you pop an' grab me for murdering some gent I never heard of. Stanislau talks you out of jailin' me. I start to get my horse, figuring to give this place a wide an' immediate go-around; an' what do I find before I even get to the O. K. Livery but my bronc hitched in front of the Crystal Mirror Bar with a strange guy steppin' into the saddle. Now I ask you, man to man, Galva—what would you have done?"

"A likely tale," Galva told him, and his lips drew back in a sneer. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm goin' to put you in the lock-up and throw the key away. Take his gun, Tolliver, an' slap a pair of cuffs on him. By Gawd," he told Haynes grimly, "there's a limit to what this town'll stand!"

"An' there a limit," Haynes drawled mildly, "to what I'll stand for, likewise. I've laid my cards on the table and put you next to the circumstances under which your deputy grabbed me. If I was the hard-case tough-monkey hombre you fellows are set on makin' me out, d'you think for one holy minute I would let a man arrest me?—Why—"

"I THINK," Clem Tolliver chucked in, "you come because your pistol was fresh out of cartridges an' my shotgun had a mighty good bead on your belly." He

flicked his twisted grin at Galva. "Don't you reckon—"

Haynes snorted. "I could have taken that Greener an' wrapped it around your wooden head before you ever guessed what struck you." His eyes brushed Tolliver aside as though the man were beneath his notice. He said to the marshal: "Now, look, Galva, I've got business in this town—"

"You said somethin' that time. You've got an appointment at my jail an' you're goin'to keep it pronto. Put your gun on my desk an' hold your hands out—"

Galva broke off abruptly, scowling, as the door swung open to admit a man in wrinkled store clothes who quietly shut it back of him and put his shoulders against it. "What are you wantin' here, Tatum?" He stared at the shopkeeping postmaster resentfully. "I'm busy—"

"I can see you are." A faint smile vaguely moved the corners of Tatum's mouth. He glanced at Henry Haynes briefly. "I allow you're arresting this man for that shooting—"

"I'm arrestin' him," declared Galva truculently, "for murder. So if you're fixin' to put your oar in—"

"Well," Tatum announced uncharitably, "you're a bigger fool than I suspected, Marshal. A bigger fool than I suspected—and that's saying quite a bit. That wasn't murder. I witnessed the whole proceeding. This man jumped a horse thief and the thief's friends tried to kill him. Self-defense—no other way to construe it. A plain case of self-defense—"

"You keep out of this, Tatum," the marshal snarled, cheeks darkening. "When I need help from you to show me how to run this office—"

"I couldn't presume to help you," Tatum said evenly. "I stepped over to make sure this stranger doesn't get handed the kind of raw deal you're getting noted for in your efforts to keep in the good books of that renegade, Curly Bill Graham."

He looked at the marshal meaningly. "I may not cut such an elegant figure by the side of Graham, Stanislau and Company, but I still can make my voice heard in the ear of Circuit Judge Benton." Contempt and arrogance stared through the postmaster's steel-rimmed spectacles. "And I still take dinner with the Governor whenever I get up to the Capital. Keep that in mind, Galva, while you're locking this gentleman up."

Galva's big frame, in the act of surging out of his chair, went stiff, sank back uncertainly. His tongue licked across his lips and his cheeks showed a dark and apoplectic coloring. His desire was plain; plain as the thin-veiled warning of the postmaster's suggestive words. But those words proved the stronger, revealed their influence in Galva's sullen glowering. A sidelight on local politics was there to be read in the corded bulge of the marshal's neck veins. Quite apparently he valued his job too highly to risk losing it by openly crossing the man who ran Greaterville's post office.

But he had to save face with his deputy. He said with a displeased frowning: "Downing three men hand-running in the space of a handful of seconds is pretty strong, even for Greaterville. Killing is killing. I don't see, Tatum, how I can—"

"Hasn't killed anyone yet, has he?"

Galva scowled at his deputy. "Didn't you say—?"

"Wal, no," Tolliver grunted reluctantly. "He didn't kill 'em; but he sure made Bannorbin an' Joe Tularosa a heap uncomfortable. Plowed a chunk of hide off Joe's left thigh an' busted Wake Bannorbin's collarbone—"

"Hell!" Galva said disgustedly. "Way you talked, I supposed he'd killed 'em." He roved a star across Haynes sternly. "My advice to you, young fella, is to get your horse an' clear out of here. By rights I'd ought to jail you; and I sure as hell will if I catch you mixed up in more trouble. You better jog over to Tombstone—they like gunplay over there."

"Sure—thanks," Haynes said. "I'll think it over," and for the second time inside of an hour he retrieved his gun from the law and walked out of the marshal's office.

But he didn't walk far. He was still on the steps when a gun winked across the night and lead thwacked the wall with a vicious chunk! Not three scant inches from his ear.

CHAPTER VIII

HAYNES had the marshal's door jerked open before a cat could blink; and while Galva, half out of his chair, was reaching for a curse, he

slammed it shut like a pistol shot and thumped the bar home solidly.

A good thick door it was and Haynes, making sure of this, put his back against it and, folding his arms across his chest, regarded Bat Galva reflectively. So long, so unflurried, so grimly saturnine he stood eyeing the marshal this way, that at last Galva stirred uneasily.

"Well, say something!" he flared up sullenly.

Haynes grinned then with the corners of his mouth and Tatum's glance grew searching. "I was thinking," Haynes drawled gently, "the situation was all the commentary needed."

"What the hell's that s'posed to mean?" demanded Galva, and the squatty Tolliver bit off a chew from the plug on the desk and launched spit at the cuspidor.

"For Christ's sake, hit it sometime!" Galva ripped out testily; and then, to Haynes: "Just what are you gettin' at, hombre?"

"Just this. I find it uncommon odd in a town that 'ain't used to violence', all a gent has to do to get himself a harp an' halo is to step out of the marshal's office. That shot didn't miss me by a hand's breadth."

"Are you claimin' someone shot at you?"

"I ain't washin' my feet," Haynes said sarcastically. "Didn't you hear the report?"

"Was that a gunshot?"

"No—some damn fool dropped his false teeth in his coffee cup!" Haynes looked the marshal over like he was trying to decide what talent, if any, the man had paraded to qualify him for packing Greaterville's tin. "I give it up," he said at last. "What did they elect you for?"

With cheeks flaunting the color of an overripe tomato, Galva came out of his chair with an oath and started for Haynes belligerently. "I've had enough of your damn lip," he gritted, balling his fists maliciously. "If you don't like this town get out of it—get out of it anyway! Hear me? You be out of it 'fore the sun comes up or—"

"Or what?" Haynes' grin was mocking.

But the baffled anger in Galva's cheeks showed suddenly, wickedly, crafty. "You're under arrest!" he snarled. "Clem, take his pistol—Don't be 'fraid of him—it ain't loaded," he growled as Tolliver hesitated. "Take his gun an' put him—

"Just a minute," Haynes said. "What's the big idea?"

"I'm holdin' you for a material witness—"

"How's that?"

"A material witness in the murder of Esteban Boyero—"

"You're batty," Haynes said. "Stanislau cleared me of any complicity or knowledge—"

"Stanislau ain't runnin' this office," Galva said with heat. "You're too damn fresh for your britches! When I get through with you, by Gawd, you'll show some respect when you talk to the law! Meantime, you're under arrest—an' you'll stay in jail till the inquest—"

"Now look here," Haynes said, putting his smile away, "you're all steamed up—talkin' wild-like. Stanislau has alibi—"

"Stanislau can shout, too! I got two witnesses that claim they saw you climbin' out of Boyero's back window at just about the right time, Mister. We'll see what the Coroner's jury has to say about your alibi! Clem, put the cuffs on—"

"Just a second," Tatum said. "At what figure are you prepared to fix bail?"

"There ain't goin' to be no bail," Galva said malevolently.

A thoughtful tongue licked Tatum's lips. "No bail, eh?" He said it softly, reflectively, with a half-closed stare searching Galva's face. "Sure you want to go on record that way?"

The marshal was framing some brash retort when he closed his mouth with a scowl.

"You're recollecting, I guess, I'm the local J. P.," Tatum smiled; and the marshal glared at him bitterly. "As such, and under the circumstances," Tatum went on, enjoying himself, "it comes under my jurisdiction to fix bail. I fix bail in this case at five dollars, and here," he said, laying five cartwheels on the marshal's desk, "it is."

Haynes chuckled at the baffled malevolence staining Galva's face a deep rich purple.

"What time and what day," Tatum asked, "is this inquest scheduled for?"

When it became evident that Galva would not answer, Tolliver said apologetically: "Tomorrow mornin', Judge—ten o'clock."

"Thank you. I shall see that Haynes appears." Tatum dusted off his coat and looked at Haynes. "Are you ready, sir? Then let's be leaving. There's a polecat smell around this place that offends my conception of the atmosphere proper to a law office."

With an ironical bow in the direction of

Marshal Galva, who was looking mad enough to bust his buttons, San Tatum, postmaster, honkytonk owner and Justice of the Peace, pulled back the bar, flung open the door and followed Haynes into the night.

CHAPTER IX

THAT THE horse-stealing episode had been framed to get Haynes shot seemed pretty obvious. Failing that, they'd aimed to jail him and would have but for Tatum. Reaching the Crystal Mirror Bar, Haynes found his horse still tethered to the hitchrail, but there wasn't any sign whatever of the men he'd had the clash with. Friends, he guessed, had lugged the wounded pair away, and the third guy, like enough, was still hell-bent for the Border. Climbing into the saddle, Haynes surveyed the older man. "I'm sure obliged to you, Tatum. Mebbe some time I can return the favor."

The Yankee stared up at him thoughtfully. "Perhaps you can. Did you happen to see who it was tried to shoot you?"

Haynes shook his head. On a sudden hunch he said, "I got a hasty squint at him," and pursed his lips, staring off reflectively across the heads of a passing ox team.

Presently Tatum said, "Galva seemed a mite put out at the way I took you away from him." A crinkle of fleeting humor briefly showed at the corners of his eyes. Then a shift of his head put a sheen of light across his glasses and left his thoughts to be guessed at. "You'll turn up for the inquest, I suppose?"

"Why not?" Haynes looked at him frankly. "I've got business in this country—can't hardly afford to run out on you."

"I wasn't thinking of the money," Tatum said a bit resentfully. But he made no explanation of what he had been thinking of; and after a moment Haynes said:

"Are you acquainted with Jake Miller, Mister Tatum?"

"Miller. . .? Let's see now. . .Miller . . ." The postmaster wrinkled craggy brows, seemed to be turning it over in his mind. "Prospector, ain't he?"

"Might be—I haven't seen him for several years. Used to know him down in Sonora; he's the reason I've come up here. Don't suppose you know where I could locate him, do you?"

Tatum shook his head. "Seems like I've heard tell that some fellow name of Miller recently moved to Phoenix or Prescott. Well, I'll be saying good night to you, sir. See you at the inquest."

"O. K.," Haynes said. Then, curiously: "I expect you know this coroner. What sort of jasper is he?"

Tatum paused. "You'd better draw your own conclusions, Haynes," he said abruptly, and with a curt nod turned away.

With a shrug, Haynes kneed the buckskin around and headed for Fish Canyon.

* * *

Leaving the animal munching hay in the slanchways-leaning stable out back of the Mining Man's Haven, Haynes stepped into the cramped lobby and in the lonesome glow of the low-turned lamp saw the red-headed girl who was dozing behind the counter. She appeared to know him. Her head came up at the sound of his step and blue eyes looked him over critically.

"So y'u air this Haywire Haynes I bin hearin' so much about?"

"At least my name is Haynes," he smiled. "You plugged that can plumb center, ma'am." He gave her casual inspection.

Seemed kind of young, he thought, to be holding down a desk in a dump like this. She wore belted jeans tucked carelessly into range boots and a rider's flannel shirt with the top three buttons unfastened; and was built like a boy save for the bulge of breasts and soft, too-rounded throat. But her legs were a boy's, long, slim and lithe, and that she had a boy's free stride he saw as she got off her stool to come and lean on the counter.

"Well," she declared, looking him over, "y'u shuah hev made a good beginning. How long do y'u reckin' y'u'll last?"

"Hmm," Haynes said, "Is that supposed to be sarcasm, ma'am?"

Humor showed in her blue eyes then; for a second they twinkled merrily and he waited to hear her laugh. But instead her glance went dark with thought and she shook her head at him dubiously. "I declare," she said, "I don't know what to make of y'u. I had y'u figured first-off for one of them slick guntoters that's come swarmin' 'round like flies to a sorghum bar'l; but I don't know. Y'u don't look that kind of polecat."

Haynes laughed. "Well, thanks for that much charity."

She reached up and got his key from the board but did not immediately give it to him. Instead, upending it on the counter,

she turned it over idly while her glance searched his face, gravely probing.

"I hear y'u used to live here, Haynes. Tell me, what did y'u come back for?"

The gray of Haynes' eyes twinkled. "Well," he drawled, "I expect I better confess. I come back for a look at you."

"Quit yo' joshin'. I'm plumb earnest." The blue eyes searched his seriously. "Y'u hadn't ought to mess with this town—it'll get y'u planted sudden, Haynes. I want to warn y'u. There's folks round here got it in for y'u. Was I y'u, I'd make tracks pronto."

Haynes regarded her thoughtfully. By grab, she seemed in dead earnest. But his experience with this town was making him leery of well-wishers; too many people appeared worried about him.

HE grinned lazily. "You seem to be pretty well posted."

"I hear a lot of things," she nodded. "There ain't very much gits by me. Runnin' a place like this—"

"Don't tell me this is your dump?"

"Why not?" she said defiantly. "Reckon I got as good a right to make what I can as the next guy."

"Why, sure, I expect you have, ma'am. It was only—I just thought you bein' a girl an' all—"

"Y'u never mind me! We're talkin' about y'u! Yo' need for advice is mighty pressin', Haynes. Y'u git yo'self out of Greaterville quick or y'u'll be a goner shuah! I ain't loadin' y'u—any fella so foolish as to smack Curly Bill in the jaw shuah needs advice in a hurry. My advice to y'u is this: Git goin' an' don't never stop till y'u git clean over the Border!"

She said it so soberly earnest, Haynes leaned against the counter and chuckled.

"Don't laugh! If y'u had ary wheels in yo' thinkbox y'u'd be knowin' it wa'n't no laughin' matter! Why, even Wyatt Earp, the Marshal of Tombstone, walks round Bill like a cat! I'm a-tellin' y'u, Haynes; Bill Graham is giant powder!"

"Well, I'll think it over. If you'll give me my key now, ma'am—"

"Don't be in such a tearin' rush. Curly Bill ain't the only bad actor round heah—I heah y'u had a run-in with Vic Stanislau, too."

"I had a few words with him," Haynes said. "He was gettin' a bit presumptuous with a lady—"

"That girl!"

Haynes looked at her more intently. The depth of her feeling surprised him. He said mildly: "What girl—?"

"That Boyero hussy! That—that Lupe Boyero flutter-lash!" Her eyes blazed up at him fiercely. "If y'u're set on stickin' round here, y'u will stick, I reckon; but if y'u got any regard fo' yo' health at all, y'u'll keep plumb away from that critter!"

"Why, ma'am," Haynes said, "you're gettin' your feathers all ruffled—"

"Never y'u mind my feathers! Y'u keep away from that woman or y'u'll land in Boot Hill, Mister! Half the men in this town's after her an'—" She stopped suddenly, with her cheeks gone brightly crimson. "Never mind—y'u steer clear of her."

"Who's this Rodriguez—?"

"That rattle-headed loco smoker! He's her cousin—or says he is. I—" She blushed again and abruptly changed the subject. "I expect y'u think y'u've been right clever; but y'u ain't foolin' nobody, Haynes—they all know what y'u're heah fo'. When a man's got business with Old Jake Miller, he's got plast the place wheah can hide his light under a bushel. Anything concernin' Jake Miller is the burnin', itchin' interest of every tough buck in this country!"

She looked at him scornfully. "Startles y'u, does it? Didn't y'u know Old Jake an' Rodriguez has been thicker'n thieves fer months? Well, they hev—an' when that greaser gits drinkin', he can't keep nothin' under his hat! He can't go out of this town without half the galoots in these mountains is hangin' on his tail! Jake Miller ain't got the sense of a two-year-old, trustin' a drunk, no-'count Mexican like that! But y'u cain't tell him nothin'—I think he's cracked in the haid myself."

"Who—Rodriguez?"

"All right!" She glared at him. "Y'u can laugh if yo' a mind to, but there's the cause of all yo' troubles—them two; Jake an' that blame loco-smokin' Rodriguez. Why, Jake's been braggin' round these hills for weeks as how he's got a fella comin' what'll make these Greaterville hard cases hunt their holes all same as rabbits. 'This fella Haynes,' Jake sez, 'will curl y'u up like a last year's leaf!' "

"Hmm," Haynes said reflectively, and did some hasty thinking. "About this Rodriguez," he said. "Just what's his connection with old Jake?"

"That's what everyone would like to know. They're jest like flies an' beef at

blow-time. Jake must be spendin' a fortune on that greaser. Comes into town with his pockets bulgin' picture rock an' swaggers an' drinks an' gambles till they've got the last piece away from him. Then soon's he gits sobered up, back he goes to Jake, an' next we know, here he is in town with his pockets full ag'in. I tell y'u, it shuah has folks guessin'—"

"You think," Haynes asked, "he gets the ore from Jake?"

"Wheah else?"

"Well, there's lots of mines round here—"

"Not that kind! Only one place he could git it an' that's Jake Miller's mine that everyone's been huntin' for—"

"Hasn't he recorded it?"

She looked at him. "Would y'u record a mine like that, things bein' as they are?"

"I don't know how things are, ma'am—"

"Y'u ought to if haff I've heerd is true," she snapped, and Haynes grinned wryly.

"I guess you know more about my business than I do myself, Miss—?"

"Anders—Penny Anders."

"I SURE am proud to know you, ma'am," Haynes said pulling off his hat. "Uh—you said one thing that kind of has me frazzled. You said this Rodriguez can't leave town without everybody's following him. How come, then, nobody's trailed him to Jake's mine?"

"He's too slick for 'em. I'll give him credit fo' that much; he's got wit enough to savvy once them hombres find Jake's mine he's killed the goose that lays his golden aiggs. Loses them every time, he does. Once they tracked him clean up into the Superstitions, but it didn't git them nothing. They think he doubled back across the Salt, but they couldn't prove it; that country south of Mormon Flat is jest one great big boulder patch. Bill Graham even has men hid out around there, up on the peaks, I guess, with telescopes; but that's all the good it does them. Jake's still got his mine an' Rodriguez still comes an' goes just about as he feels like."

"Do you reckon Esteban Boyero's killing has any connection with Jake's mine?"

She looked startled. "Say! I hadn't thought of that—" She seemed about to add something; changed her mind and shrugged. "I can tell y'u this, though—what happened to Boyero ain't goin' to be a patch to what them ringtails'll be doin' to y'u 'f y'u don't light a shuck out of yere."

Haynes grinned. "Don't you fret about me, ma'am—"

"Humph!" she interrupted, sniffing. "I ain't frettin' 'bout any man!" But the flush in her cheeks and the frank interest in her glance belied the scornful statement. She held Haynes' key out, and as he reached to take it, mentioned as though it were something just then crossing her mind. "There's goin' to be a big time down to Tucson Friday week. Biggest dawg in a coon's age—grand concert, ball an' ever'thin'. All the bigwigs will be there all dyked out in their glad rags an' the Fifth Cavalry band is goin' to furnish the racket." Blue eyes showed a wistful hunger. "Shuah is a pity they're goin' to lock y'u up fo' Esteban's murder, Haynes . . ."

"I can see you've caught it, too," Haynes grinned.

"Caught what?"

"Local habit of jumping to conclusions." Cuffing the dust from his clothes Haynes picked up his key.

"Y'u won't be feelin' so cocky when that coroner's crowd gits through with y'u. I bet—" She stopped, glance wheeling toward the door.

Haynes wheeled his glance, too, and saw a man that jumped his eyes wide open. "Great Judas Priest!" he said. "If it ain't Al Loving!" He strode forward quickly, hand held out, a smile of genuine pleasure plowing through the surprise that was on his cheeks. "H'are you, Al? By grab, I thought they had you planted!"

"Wot's that? 'Arf a mo' there, guv'nor," said the man in the doorway gruffly. "Yer got the wrong steer hitched to yer rope, pal. My nime ain't Loving; my nime is Flasker—T. J. Flaster—an' I got orl the mines I want—see?" And, snatching the key the girl reached down to him, he tramped, still muttering, up the stairs.

CHAPTER X

THOUGH the hour was late and Haynes was feeling like the frazzled end of a misspent life, with all the excitements he had been through in the last few hours, he could not get to sleep to save him. He cussed the lumpy mattress, cussed the cramped and stuffy closeness of his cubbyhole of a room. And lastly and emphatically he cussed out Old Jake Miller.

But the plain truth was, his head was too filled with questions and conjectures to give him any rest.

Just like Old Jake, he thought disgustedly, to go around telling everybody he had sent for a man who would show them what was what. In some things Jake used the judgment of a billy-goat. Why, damn it, the whole country appeared to know more about Haynes' business than he did himself! No wonder all these bucks were trying to get in solid with him! Jake must have hit the Mother Lode, if desire to find his mine were causing all this stir on the part of Greaterville's tough monkeys.

And Rodriquez—what hold did that guy have on Jake to cause the old man to load him down with jewelry rock every time the fellow came around? Haynes' remembrance of Jake Miller was of a tight old secretive Dutchman who would sooner cut an arm off than give a worn-out hat away. What had happened to so change him? Not that Jake wasn't good-hearted; but when it came to gold, Old Jake had the soul of a miser. "Why," Haynes growled, "the old coot would skin a flea for its hide an' tallow!"

And where did that girl, Lupe Boyero, fit into the picture? She was in all right—but where? And the dead man, Esteban, with the burned feet and the knife shoved in his ribs?

And Sanford Tatum, the carpet-bagging Yankee?

It was plain where Curly Bill Graham and Stanislau came in. They were plainly after Jake's mine. Was Tatum after it also?

Who the hell was Clem Tolliver, Galva's deputy marshal? Haynes was sure he'd met the man before; but to save him he could not think where or under what circumstance. And Galva—was he, as Graham had claimed, a tool of Sanford Tatum? Or was he—and Haynes thought this a deal more likely—working for Graham, Stanislau & Company?

And who had fired at Haynes as he had stepped from Galva's office? One of Bill Graham's plug-uglies? Graham himself? Haynes wouldn't have put it past him. As that girl downstairs had hinted. Graham was hardly of the caliber to go burying any hatchets after the way Haynes' fist had publicly sat him in the dust!

He thought of Penny Anders, too. She had a fresh, unusual charm that kept a man in mind of her. "And mighty free with her opinions," Haynes muttered, grinning ruefully. Be kind of pretty, he thought, if she hadn't so many freckles and would comb her hair more careful. Lord! what a head of hair she had! Just like a desert sunset!

Then his thoughts flipped over to Lupe. Lupe Boyero. Sure had a fetching name—Lupe . . . Lupe Boyero. "Hmm."

Haynes found he could recall each grace and gesture; each changing play of light across those exquisite cameo features. That was it; like a cameo, he thought. Alabaster cheeks, red lips and flashing eyes all framed by the blue-black sheen of her hair; she was like something out of a book he thought, and scowled as he recalled the terms that red-head had applied to her.

Jealous, catty—that was it. He guessed Lupe was not a girl other women would have much use for. She was too fine, too elegant, too above them. He recalled the odd, low, husky cadence of her voice—like far-off temple chimes soft-rung by a padre's hand; and felt his pulse beat faster as memory called up other things about her.

Must be a friend of Jake's, he guessed; maybe she was what was back of Miller's lavish treatment of Rodriguez. That must be it! Old Jake was—

It was then Haynes remembered the letter—the unsealed letter he'd got from Tatum with Jake's hentrack scrawl across its front.

He sat bolt upright, threw the covers back and swung his legs to the floor while his left hand lifted anxiously to feel of his shirt pocket.

Gone!

By grab, it was! He'd put it there; he knew he had. But it was not in the pocket now! Pulling on his boots, he hastily stood up, began pawing through his other pockets. It was gone, all right; it wasn't on him anyplace!

He sat down on the edge of the bed then, lips tight, gray eyes scowling, thoughtful. Had he lost it hanging that haymaker on Curly Bill Graham's jaw?

It did not, he thought, seem likely. Nor did it seem particularly plausible that he could have lost it any other time. It had fit the pocket too snugly; he recalled now what a job he'd had getting the letter stuffed in there. It had been a bulky thing, tight-packed with folded paper.

He wondered if he could have dropped

it while stooping above the girl—above Lupe Boyero when she'd fallen to fool the bushwhacker shooting from the alley? But no; it couldn't have fallen out, then or any other time.

HE FELT again of the pocket—stiffened. It was ripped; one side was torn half down, and despite himself an ugly thought flashed through his mind. Had Lupe taken it?

He cursed himself for a fool. Of course she hadn't—she hadn't even known of it! He was letting that red-head's catty spleen . . . Lupe was far too fine to ever stoop to such a thing. No matter what her part in this business, she could not be petty; sneaking. No girl with eyes like hers could—

Haynes' thoughts broke off as he caught his breath, his gone-slim gaze intently fixed upon the door. The key was a joke; it could not be locked; he'd neglected to put a chair against it. and that stealthy creak of a shifting weight had certainly come from the hallway.

His hand went out, sought the bedpost where he'd hung his belt and pistol. Very slowly, utterly quiet, he lifted the heavy Colt from leather and waited, lips quirked maliciously as he watched where, in a shaft of the late moon's rising, the doorknob was softly turning.

The door began to swing inward.

A man's voice, held whisper-low, said: "Haynes—Haynes! Are you in there?"

No reply came from where the moonlight glinting off the pistol's barrel showed the flash of Haynes' bared teeth.

A man's head came around the stopped line of the door's edge—froze.

"Come right in," Haynes bade hospitably. "That's it—quiet-like. Just shut the door the same way, will you? Can you see that washstand by the window? You'll find a lamp around there someplace. Light it."

In the orange-yellow flare, Haynes saw a man in a patched shirt, frazzled corduroy trousers and boots that, like the rest of him, appeared considerably the worse for wear. A dusty, tattered gray silk scarf was yanked like a hitchrope around his neck in typical hard-case fashion; and that he was hard case few persons would have doubted after a look at his sixgun's handle. A floppy-brimmed sombrero was cuffed far back on his head in a manner that didn't detract a particle from his general go-to-hell air. And that the air was not put on was amply evidenced by the quick, hard grin he blossomed in reply to Haynes' cold stare. He seemed not at all put out that Haynes had caught him.

"Nice large evenin', ain't it? Betcha two-bits you'll know me next time you—"

"There may not be any next time," Haynes said grimly. "What handle are you packin'?"

"Sam Smith's my name—though I see by the handbills them rattle-headed Texas Rangers has been plasterin' round the country I'm also knowed as 'Two-Bits' Smith—but don't stand on ceremony, Mister. Call me anything you like."

"Hard article, ain't you? What was the big idea bustin' in my room?"

"I was comin' up to have a little chin music with you—"

"I suppose you was imitatin' a caterpillar so as not to wake the neighbors!"

"Well — yeah. Somethin' like that," Smith nodded, grinning unabashedly. "Them stairs is awful creekers if you don't get yer feet jest planted right. Did—"

"Never mind," Haynes said. "I'll call your bluff. What did you want to see me about?"

"Life insurance. Got yours all paid up? Uh—say!" Smith affected sudden anxiety. "You ain't in arrears, boy, are you?"

"Look," Haynes said very softly. "This may be a lot of fun to you, my friend, but I'm not in the mood for humor. Not in the mood at all. If you want to leave here in the same condition you arrived get busy talkin'—an' never mind the frills."

SMITH dug up a martyr look; discarded it with the abruptness that characterizes impulse. "Say—put that hog-leg down a bit an' I'll show you how to flick a gun. C'mon, sport! Betcha two-bits I can get my smoke-cart rollin' 'fore you can even touch leather!"

Like a flash a quarter thumped Sam Smith in the chest; and when his amazed stare lifted from watching it roll in a corner, he must have seen Haynes' hands were empty. Some of the humor washed out of his eyes, left them probing, calculant, narrow.

Like an eagle's plunge his left hand dived for leather. A blur, a glint, and his gun was out. Cold and naked it gleamed at his thigh with right hand spread above it, heel ready to bat the hammer.

It was a move Smith never completed. Instead he grinned reluctantly; stayed frozen in his crouch, unblinking. For Haynes' gun, too, was out—scarred thumb holding back the hammer; and Smith's cheeks said he knew quite well how close he stood to death right then.

"You'd better set that pistol down or I can't be responsible for my acts," Haynes mentioned.

The words were an out and Sam Smith took it. He eased the gun back into its sheath, took a deep breath and told Haynes frankly: "The fanner never lived that could beat your style. Here's your two-bits, fella—I spoke out of turn—"

"You ain't talked half enough," Haynes said. "I'm still cravin' to know what brought you up here."

Smith scratched his shaggy head. Considered. "Ever hear of Jarales?—Sena Jarales. Mex gun fighter an' stick-up artist. Got himself some renegade backin' an' is figurin' to take up the slack in Curly Bill's business—after he's through with you, I mean." Smith grinned. "He's on his way to Greaterville now, all set to cut your heart out."

"I think," Haynes said, "you're the biggest liar out of Texas," and, as though to emphasize the insult, tossed his gun over on the bed.

But Smith just grinned. "I'm the biggest rustler that ever come out—includin' John Chisum," he chuckled. "But that's straight, fella; that's what I came up to tell you. Jarales is after your scalp, my boy, an' unless you look spry he'll get it."

Haynes had heard of Jarales, all right—who hadn't? The man had been harassing the Border for months with his raids and the authorities seemed powerless to stop him. But that Jarales should be hunting *him* was more than Haynes could swallow. Why, he'd never even met the man!

As though reading his mind, Smith said: "It's that girl—Lupe Boyero," and Haynes' eyes slimmed to slits.

Two forward strides put him right against Smith and he twisted the man's patched shirt. "What's that?"

"Have a care, by cripes, what you do to that shirt—I hev to do my own mendin'," Smith growled, and would have said more, but right then Haynes told him thinly:

"I'm all through playin' guessin' games, hombre. You talk or I'll work you over."

There was an odd, bright look in Smith's quick stare. "O. K. Leave go of my shirt then. That's straight," he said as Haynes stepped back. "Jarales is lookin' for you with mud in his eye an' it's what I come up here to tell you. He's plain nuts about that Boyero dame an' thinks you're making a pass for her—he heard all about your run-in with Stanislau—"

"By grab!" Haynes growled exasperated. "This is the damnedest country ever I see! Every guy an' his uncle knows more about my business than *I* do! If this Mex knows so much, how come he ain't whettin' his knife for Stanislau?"

Smith shrugged. "Mebbe he is. All I know is—"

"Yes! An' how do you know so damn much?"

"Oh, I get around," Smith grinned. "One of the advantages of bein' in the trade, so to speak. You get to hear things—"

"Maybe," Haynes said grimly, "you've heard where I can find Jake Miller?"

"Jake Miller's dead," Smith said.

CHAPTER XI

"DEAD!"

"Dead as a doornail—been dead over a week. S'prised you haven't guessed it after what he wrote in that letter—"

"What letter?" Haynes' eyes were narrow.

"One you got from the postoffice—now keep off! Leave my shirt alone—you've done enough—"

"What do you know about that letter?"

"Plenty!" Smith grinned brazenly. "Leastways, I know as much as you do—I've read it."

What Haynes might have done or said right then had there been no interruption is a matter for speculation. There was an interruption. Before Haynes could do or say anything at all—before he could so much as get the startled look off his face—the door was pushed open by an incoming pedestrian who, glumly silent and without an excuse or a by-your-leave, made a complete circuit of the room, tipped his hat without pause as he came abreast the door again, said "Large evening" laconically, and went sailing on off up the hall.

Mr. Samuel "Two-Bits" Smith stood goggling at the left-open door much as the whale must have goggled after getting rid of Jonah. "What the hell was that?"

"Don't ask me," Haynes glared. "I only rent this room!"

"Mean to say that squirt barged in without knowin' you from Adam?"

"You did, didn't you?"

"That's different," Smith growled, kicking the door shut with a bang. He looked at Haynes suspiciously. "You must have some idea who he is."

Haynes said exasperated: "I expect he's the guy the redhead downstairs was tellin' me is an English tourist—whatever that is. Some kind of a British lord or something, rompin' around incognito." Haynes' tone dismissed the entire matter of the perambulating nobleman. "So," he snarled, "you read Jake's letter, did you? I guess some pigeons flew by an' dropped it in your lap!"

"Well, no," Smith said. "As a matter of fact I picked it up—"

"Yeah—" Haynes drawled; "all who believe that go stand on their head!"

"Well, it's the truth!" Smith said defiantly; and hastily; "Never mind workin' no mad up. You can hev it back if you want it—here!"

Haynes thrust the crumpled offering without looking at it into the waistband of his Levis, and knew by the heft and feel of it that all wasn't in it that had been. He mentioned the fact.

"That's all that was in it when I found it! An' I guess you know it," Smith added, glowering. "What'd you do with the map?"

"Don't play games with me! You know goddam well," Smith rasped, "I ain't talkin' about no map of the Argentine pampas! Come off it, bucko! You can't hide a thing like that—"

"Oh-ho!" Haynes said very softly. "So now we learn, eh? You snuk up here, thinkin' I was out, to hunt for—"

"Well," Smith wrinkled a grimace, "I didn't find it. 'F you hadn't been—"

"If I hadn't been up here you wouldn't of had any better luck. I ain't got this precious map—in fact," Haynes growled, "I haven't even read the letter."

Smith showed a disbelieving grin. "You can't fool Aunty that way—"

The rest of his lines died a-borning as, once aagin, the door came open and in tramped the fellow Haynes had accosted in the lobby earlier; the man he'd described as a traveling lord or something. He was a traveler, all right. As before, he traveled completely around the room, tipped his hat as he reached the door, mumbled "Large evening," and went sailing off up the hall again.

"Damn me for a monkey's uncle!" glared Sam Smith, and slammed the door shut violently. "That guy's got—"

"What I want to know," Haynes declared, "is where you picked that letter up!"

"Well. . .as a matter of fact," Smith said, "I didn't pick it up exactly. That is, I— See here, you!" he snarled malevolently as the touring Britisher, bowler hat, baggy tweeds, bulldog pipe, gaiters, walking shoes and everything came tramping into the room again. "What the hell do you think this is? The promenade deck of a goddam steamer?"

The man in the British tweeds stopped abruptly, bleared owlishly at Haynes and, looking down his nose, demanded querulously: "'Oo's that?" His screwed-up watery stare picked over Sam Smith like a fishwife ogling a rummage sale.

Smith looked like he would choke. "The name is Smith!" he snarled. "An' if you know what's good for you—"

"Lumme! Smith! Fawncy! Wot a common nime! 'Ow long's this blighter going to 'ang araund, eh?" he inquired of Haynes. "I cawn't wite quite forever, yer know! 'F it comes ter that, I've more bloody mines right now than—"

"Oh! Mines, is it?" Smith looked at Haynes malevolently. "I thought you said this guy was a traveler!"

"Wot abaht it? Wot if I am, eh?" T. J. Flasker screwed his eyes up fiercely, "I gas as good a right ter travel as the next bloke! An' if it comes ter that, I could do with a bit o' travelin' right now—your travelin'—see? 'Op it! Pull yer frite!"

Smith seemed of half a mind to pull his gun instead; only the warning glint of Haynes' gray stare appeared to keep him from it. Getting a new hold on his temper, he said in a tone that consigned the Britisher to a place far removed from Greaterville: "I've more important fish to fry—"

"Oh! A fish, am I? Blimey!" A dull flush jumped over Flasker's face and, like a magician pulling hats from a rabbit, he procured a shining something out of thin air that when jutted at Sam Smith's midrift proved to be a derringer maliciously designed to explode a shotgun shell. A shotgun shell was in it and from the look of Flasker's cheeks it might get exploded any second.

Smith's hands clawed for his ears.

"Lumme! A 'fish' sez 'e!" the man in the tweed pants grumbled. "I've 'arf a mind ter plarster yer orl over the perishin' county! Eh—'Allo! Wot's this? More company?"

It was the redhead, Penny Anders, and she was mad as a wet-footed cat. "See here! Y'u'll hev to quit that. There's people tryin' to sleep in this place—"

"Eh?" said Flasker blinking. "Sleep? Oh, I say! Wot a deuced time to be sleeping! Fawncy! Three o'clock!"

The girl's stormy glance raked over them hotly. "A body'd think this was a parlor social the way yo' tongues is clatterin'! Ain't y'u got no thought for others? I'm shuah put out with y'u, Lord Tweedsmeir—I thought y'u was a gentleman!"

Flasker colored. Confused, he took his bowler hat off disclosing taffy-colored hair neatly parted in the center. "Er. . . Ah—Look 'ere! The nime, deah girl, is Flasker—T. J. Flasker—I insist upon it! Really! I've been told this is a democratic country, don't you know? No titles—everybody equal—every person as good as his neighbor. Er, that is—almost," he said with a look at Smith.

But she waved all this aside. "What are y'u doin' with that popgun?"

Flasker's color heightened. He stared down at the weapon foolishly. "Oh. . . Ah. . . Uh—really! Wheah'd that come from?" He blinked his watery stare around as though seeking who had put it there. "Is this thing yours?" he said to Smith.

"Ahr—go roll your hoop!" Smith growled and, striding brusquely past the girl, went thumping down the stairs.

"A most unpleasant specimen," commented Flasker, grimacing. "Er—you was sayin', deah girl?"

"Y'u better put that pea-shooter up an' go on back to bed," said Penny Anders coldly. "An' tomorrer," she said to Haynes, "y'u better hunt yo'se'f new lodgin's. Yo' too obstreperous fo' the Haven, Mister—y'u'll be gittin' my place a bad name."

CHAPTER XII

HENRY ALGERNON HAYNES his folks had christened him; but these were names no man of spirit could tolerate and, long since, Mr. H. A. Haynes had picked him out a brace of handles more naturally adopted to a man of his abilities. But, like his can of private cusswords, these were cherished things and he kept them stored away against the need of special occasions.

One such was coming up and a hearty hammering on his door eventually roused him to its imminence.

"Haynes! Haynes!" It was the redhead's exasperated voice. "Fo' the love of Pete, wake up! What y'u think this is? An' what's the big idee pilin' things ag'in' this do'? I declare! Y'u better hump yo'se'f or y'u'll hev that connivin' Galva an' his polecate deputy bustin' in yere after y'u! D'y'u know what time o' the clock it is?"

"I'll bite," Haynes said sleepily.

"Y'u'll get bit if y'u don't git up!" she told him. "It's ten o'clock an' that inquest's ready to bubble!"

The bed creaked but there wasn't any following sound of Haynes' feet hitting the floor.

"I ain't goin' to call y'u ag'in!" Penny Anders said, and went flouncing off down the stairs.

* * *

Juan Capistrano, famed Sevillian matador, was scheduled to harass and finally exterminate that day Don Pedro, Nogales' toughest bull; but Haynes, perspiringly using his elbows in the wake of the cursing Clem Tolliver, was of the opinion that Don Pedro would probably live to snort and roar another day if Capistrano cared anything for the size of his gate receipts. The Greaterville courthouse was packed and jammed to capacity, every window was filled with avid faces and the buzz of talk in twenty languages was like the din of Babel. The inquest on the remains of the late Don Esteban Boyero bade fair to be an event of major importance in the history of Pima County.

It looked, Haynes thought, like if anyone drew a full-sized breath, the whole dang courthouse would go down like the walls of Jericho. As special concession to the anticipated importance of the occasion, a large Union flag was hung across the back end of the room, behind the speaker's platform, and upon the platform itself a bare pine table and a couple of homemade chairs had been placed to facilitate the business of the day. On one of these chairs, with his head tipped back and a glass at his mouth, lolled the Coroner with all his carpetbagger's arrogance. And at sight of

him Haynes cursed softly under his breath.

It was Vic Stanislau, Prince Albert coat, striped trousers, plug hat and all!

Setting down his empty glass, the hotel-keeping coroner got importantly to his feet and, picking up a bung-starter, rapped authoritatively for quiet. It took some time, however, and a deal of hearty pounding to get the desired decorum. In the interim Haynes looked around.

There certainly was a mob here!

The place must have held at least three score of benches, and every one was packed. Booted and belted cowhands, bearded and red-shirted miners, prospectors from every walk of life, gossiping, sun-bonneted women, shopkeepers, stablehands, mule-skinners, men in the employ of the stage lines, gamblers, cappers, touts and even a sprinkling of those rouged and mascaraed creatures who nightly put their charms on sale were brazenly hogging an entire bench, giggling and poking one another as they craned their necks to get a look at Stanislau round the sundry big hats impeding vision. The aisles were so crammed with standers that Clem Tolliver, taking the list Vic Stanislau handed him, had to call his witnesses from the bench where he sat beside Haynes; but before he started calling, Stanislau made his speech to the jury—those twelve good fellows and true.

There were twelve of them, anyway, Haynes noted; three Papagos, one Pima, two negroes, a Mexican, the big fat dame Haynes had seen last night haranguing the crowd from her tenthouse, a faro-dealer from the Crystal Mirror, a visiting cattle buyer whom Haynes had last seen in El Paso, Sam Smith and Curly Bill Graham. Looking them over, Haynes had a hunch he should have taken Galva's advice and left this place in a hurry. But it was too late now; he could not get out if he wanted to.

ON THE farthest end of the bench he was helping hold down sat Lupe Boyero, a vision of radiant loveliness despite the black of her mourning clothes, despite the alabaster pallor of fragile cameo features; and Haynes was aware he was not the only hombre whose eyes kept wandering that way. There were dark circles under Lupe's eyes, but like the tiny bit of lace which she kept carrying up to them, these but enhanced her air of tragic loveliness. She looked so desperately alone; so frail—so helpless.

Penny Anders was in the courtroom also; and Haynes could not help comparing her with Lupe. Such a contrast. With her red hair, freckles, cowboy's shirt and Levis, Penny was a lively picture of glowing, robust health. She made Lupe seem more than ever something from a book or painting; something precious, fragile as a wild flower—a creature too delicate to long endure the violence of this rough gold camp.

Then Haynes' attention was caught by Stanislau's address. Half turned to face the jury, his poise spoke of arrogant confidence. He made a commanding, eye-filling appearance as he stood there, suavely at his ease, teetering on his bootheels, hands folded under his coattails.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," he said impressively. "You've been brought here on this painful occasion to determine from the facts presented, the cause and manner of the late Don Esteban Boyero's untimely demise—to determine if this fine and upright citizen was struck down in the prime of life by accident, suicide, or by malicious, premeditated intent. In the event your intelligent consideration of the facts should point unerringly toward premeditated intent—that is to say, toward murder—you are to establish, if possible, the identity of the guilty party or parties." With a studied bow Stanislau turned from them to face the avid audience. "This court," he said a trifle grimly, "will come to order. Tolliver, call the first witness."

Tolliver stood up and called a doctor who testified that, in his opinion, death had come to Don Esteban as the result of a stab-wound. Asked by Stanislau if it could have been self-inflicted, the Doc shook his head emphatically. "Definitely, no," he said. "The man was plainly murdered—I may say tortured and murdered."

The packed room buzzed with excitement as the sawbones wedged himself back on his seat.

"Cole Grepting," Tolliver called. "Cole Grepting, stand up an' git sworn."

Two rows back of Haynes a man wriggled noisily to his feet. Haynes, looking round as Grepting was being administered the oath, saw that the man was one of the two hard cases that had been with Stanislau in Galva's office last night when the marshal had first arrested him.

After the formalities were over with,

Stanislau said: "Where were you last night at approximately ten-thirty?" (This was the time set by the doctor for Esteban Boyero's passing.)

"I was startin' down that alley back of Boyero's."

"Suppose you tell this court what you saw as you turned into the alley."

"Well...." Grepting cleared his throat and, avoiding Haynes' cold stare, said hurriedly: "I saw a guy gettin' out of Boyero's back window."

The remark was a deliberate lie, as Haynes had not climbed out of Boyero's window until very nearly twelve; but few besides Haynes knew this and the courtroom buzzed like a beehive.

Stanislau rapped for order.

"Buck Bender!" Tolliver called, and from the left of Haynes another man got up and was sworn. He testified in almost the exact words of Grepting. "Were you two gents together?" Stanislau asked. They said they were. "Would either of you recognize this man if you saw him again?" Both the witnesses said "Yes," whereupon Stanislau looked at Tolliver and the deputy marshal with a vindictive gleam in his eye snapped loudly:

"Haynes! H. A. Haynes! Git up an' be sworn!"

HAYNES got up and took the oath. "And where were you, Mister Haynes, at approximately ten-thirty last night?" asked Stanislau.

"I don't know," Haynes said. "I was ramblin' around all evenin' takin' in the sights. I'm a stranger here. Can't say where I was at any special time."

Grepting and Bender were still on their feet. Stanislau looked at them. "Either of you gents seen this fellow before?"

The two men nodded.

"When?"

"Last night," said Grepting; and Bender nodded.

"Where?"

"In that alley back of Boyero's. We seen him getting out Boyero's window."

"Er. . . Would you say he acted suspiciously?"

Both men nodded. "He kept lookin' round," Bender said, "like he was scared somebody would spot him."

Stanislau glanced about the crowded room and stood a moment in silence. "Ah.... Would you be prepared to swear," he suggested blandly, "that Mister H. A. Haynes was the man you saw? Think carefully, gentlemen. We're investigating a murder. I wouldn't want any miscarriage of justice. And I'm sure you wouldn't. Are you certain Haynes is the man you saw climbing out of Don Esteban's window?"

"You're goddam tottin'!" Grepting said; and Bender nodded emphatically.

"Thank you, gentlemen. You may sit down. Mr. Haynes," the coroner said, "would you care to make a statement?"

Haynes knew without looking round that every eye in the place was on him. The room felt cold and there was an ironic glint in Sam Smith's eye where he sat in the jurybox between the cattle-buyer and the fat Madam of the joy-tent.

He was being framed, was deliberately and cold-bloodedly being made a scapegoat; and only one person in this place could save him. But Haynes did not look at her. Lupe Boyero had not wanted Curly Bill's outfit to know he had been in that house with her. She must know his danger; if she would not speak, Haynes could not. Not with honor.

He shrugged. "I guess not," he said grimly.

"All right. Sit down, then," Stanislau said and flapped his coattails.

Haynes could feel Penny Anders' glance upon him worriedly. But he wouldn't look at her. He kept his glance straight front and strove to find some out from this, some loophole his enemies overlooked. It didn't seem like there was any. He was a stranger here and anyone who might have helped him would hardly feel disposed to bring upon themselves the unwelcome attention such interference would warrant from the toughs who ran the town. Lupe Boyero was his only hope; and she too would be kept silent by the same necessity. She had herself to look out for, and from that scene he'd witnessed between herself and Stanislau yesterday, he guessed she must already have all she could contend with. Still, he was a little disappointed that she did not speak.

He looked at her, covertly, with the tag-end of his front-held glance.

The dead-white pallor of her face gave deepened redness to the tragic line of trembling lips. Her eyes were fixed unseeingly before her and in her lap the slender hands were clenched about the twisted, crumpled lace of her tiny kerchief. Her proud shoul-

ders drooped forlornly and every slender, fine-etched line of her showed the crushed dreariness of her thoughts.

Stanislau rapped for order, and when the room had quieted, said: "Call your next witness, Tolliver."

"Lupe Boyero."

As in a dream the girl stood up and Stanislau, suddenly the smiling gallant, squeezed forward and helped her to the stand. She had too much publicity value to be allowed to testify from her seat. He proffered a chair with a little flourish, and when she sank into it with great dark eyes unseeingly above the crowd, he said:

"Where were you, Miss Boyero, at the time of your uncle's death?"

"I....I don't know," she answered finally.

"Don't know! Come, come, girl! Surely you know where you spent the evening—weren't you at home?"

"I—" She hesitated, dark eyes stabbing fleetingly toward Haynes. Vaguely she said, low voice scarcely above a whisper: "I—was out...."

"Out? You mean out around town? ....Louder, please; the court can't hear you," the coroner instructed brusquely. "Were you by yourself? Or was there someone with you?"

"I—I—" Her eyes turned piteously toward Haynes. Faintly Haynes shook his head. Lupe Boyero said: "I was alone."

"Well, what were you doing? How long were you out?"

The girl stared at the crumpled lace that was twisted between her fingers.

STANISLAU said impatiently: "Come, come, Miss Boyero! We all know how badly you feel about Don Esteban's death; our hearts go out to you in sympathy. But this is a coroner's inquest. We must ascertain the facts of your uncle's death. If you can cast any light on this unfortunate affair, it is your bounden duty to do so. Kindly tell the court where you went, how long you were away from home, and—"

"Do I have to?" There was desperation in her voice, and the way she twisted round in her chair to see the coroner's features displayed a neat length of silk clad ankle.

Stanislau's brows went up. "You are not compelled to, no," he said; "but I am bound to tell you that in the vent of such refusal, the court may put its own interpretation—"

"Very well, then. I refuse to answer," Lupe said with a lift of her chin. "What I did last night, or what I may do any other time, concerns no one but myself."

With a frown, Vic Stanislau stepped round where he could see her. He leaned a little forward, and with hands clasped beneath his coattails, brusquely bade Haynes stand. "Do you know this witness, H. H. Haynes?" he demanded of Lupe Boyero. "Look at him and answer."

The girl's dark lashes fluttered. "I do not know him."

"But you've seen him before?"

She hesitated. "Yes, I have seen him."

"When did you first see him?"

"I think....yesterday afternoon."

Stanislau took a turn or two, wheeled and said abruptly: "I put it to you, Miss Boyero. Isn't this man, H. A. Haynes, the fellow I caught forcing his attentions upon you yesterday at the Antler House?"

Several gasps broke the breathless silence as the girl half rose from her chair. There was indignation in her stare and sharp retort seemed quivering on her lips. Then, oddly, the flare of anger died from her cheeks and she sank back. She said faintly: "I refuse to answer."

Stanislau straightened blandly. "Very well," he said, "you may stand down. Tolliver! Recall H. A. Haynes—bring him up here where the court can see him."

CHAPTER XIII

WHISPERS and excited mutterings made a low drone in the courtroom as Haynes, following the deputy marshal, squeezed a slow passage to the platform, was resworn and took the chair Lupe Boyero had just vacated.

Whatever Haynes' thoughts, there was little to be gleaned from the taciturn arrangement of his features. His cool gray stare played out across the crowd with a composed and tranquil interest; and this calm, unaffected poise, this ease and self-possession, plainly bespoke a man unworried, unafraid. That the clean-cut virile manliness of him did not go unnoticed was attested by the considering and speculative glances flicked from him to Stanislau by the gentler half of the animated assemblage. Even Big Berta, the fat dame

in the jurybox, sat up straighter as she eyed him.

The coroner set down his glass and rapped again for quiet.

"Full name and occupation, Haynes."

"H. A. Haynes—cattleman."

"Rancher?"

"Up until a couple weeks ago I was roddin' the Eagle Land & Cattle Company's Circle Star, Senora, Mexico."

"I see. And since then?"

"I've been doing a bit of lookin' round."

"How did you come to leave the employ of this Eagle outfit?"

Haynes considered. "I'd been intendin' to quit for some time. A letter from a friend urging me to meet him here decided me."

"One wonders what this friend's name was?"

"Does one? No law against wonderin', I reckon."

Stanislau said sharply: "Do you refuse to answer?"

"Say instead I see no reason to," Haynes drawled.

The coroner frowned, appeared to scan something in his mind. He said abruptly: "Aren't you the man they call 'Haywire' Haynes?"

"I've been called that," Haynes admitted.

"What was the nature of the summons sent by this mysterious friend?"

"You know, somehow," Haynes drawled, "I seem to have forgotten."

Dull color spread across Stanislau's cheeks and he said nastily: "Isn't it your boast that the 'A' in your name stands for 'Action?'"

"What a quaint idea."

With a malevolent smile, the coroner inquired urbanely: "Wasn't it in connection with old Jake Miller's mine that you came up here?"

That brought a concerted gasp from the staring spectators, waged their heads and leaned them forward, eyes bright with excitement and anticipation. Anything connected with Old Jake's mine appeared to rouse a burning interest in the denizens of this community. The only apparent effect of the question on Mr. Haywire Haynes however was a deepening of the sardonic quirk that faintly edged his lips.

"You seem to know all about it," he suggested.

Stanislau frowned briefly at the polished toes of his boots. "Did you know your friend was dead?" He launched the question softly, well timed to the lift of his eyes.

But Haynes just looked at him puzzled. "'Fraid I don't quite follow you."

"Jake Miller's dead. He was found two nights ago in Fish Greek Canyon with his head bashed in."

Nothing, it seemed, could quell the startled uproar that was loosed by the coroner's words. Again and again, violently, he pounded the table for order; with his sallow face a dull beet-red, he shouted, cursed and hammered. The bung-starter left deep scars on the table, but it was a long and hectic five minutes before he could make himself heard above the din. "By God," he shouted then, "I'll have quiet or clear this room. Sit down! Goddamit! Toliver! Arrest that big-hatted fool!"

It was another three or four minutes before the atmosphere proper to the occasion was regained. The news of Miller's death was very evidently news, and news the crowd didn't like, implying as it did the possibility of Miller's having carried the secret of his hidden mine grimly with him to the grave. One could not doubt, witnessing this demonstration, that Miller's mine was—or was at any rate believed to be—the discovery of the century. Yet through it all Haynes sat unmoved, bronzed face composed as ever.

Stanislau mopped his perspiring face and glared savagely. "If there are any more such disturbances, I'll clear this room, so help me!" He fiddled with his stock, readjusted the California poppy in his coat lapel and generally got himself together. He crossed the platform then to consult behind his hand with Tolliver who nodded solemnly with his deep-sunk eyes on Haynes.

THE coroner straightened, flicked a bit of dust from his sleeve and said: "I suggest, Haynes, that you knew all this. I suggest that you killed Jake Miller to possess yourself of his mine."

If he had hoped to startle Haynes into some betrayal, he must have been disappointed. Haynes' face gave nothing away; it was as calm, as tranquilly composed as when he had first come up to the platform. "Do you?" he said quietly.

"Didn't you?" Stanislau's pose as well

as his tone was a patent accusation. But all Haynes said very dryly was:

"I'm afraid I don't remember."

"When, prior to this inquest, was the last time you saw Miss Boyero?"

"'Fraid I don't remember."

"You've got a rather convenient forgettery," the coroner sneered. "I suggest the last time you saw her was last night at ten-thirty when she returned to her uncle's house to find Don Esteban dead on the floor and you getting out of the window!"

Haynes grinned. "You ought to write penny-dreadfuls. This job's wasted on a man of your talents, Stanislau."

Stanislau snapped: "What caliber pistol do you use?"

"What's the matter? Has Tolliver lost it?"

"Why did you kill Boyero?"

"Guess I don't remember that, either," Haynes drawled through a yawn. "You fellows kept me up so late last night, I can't seem to remember anything."

"It's too bad about your memory! When they put a rope around your neck—"

"Aren't you bein' a little premature?" Haynes grinned.

"I'll ask the questions, thank you! Your sarcasm is entirely out of place here, bucko. You'll be doing yourself no good with all these wise cracks. They only advertise your callous and coldblooded turn of mind—and that has been sufficiently advertised already." Stanislau leaned forward grimly. "I suggest that on receipt of Jake's letter you went directly to a rendezvous with him someplace south of Mormon Flat, that you endeavored to cajole or bully him into disclosing the location of his mine; that upon his refusal to do so, in a fit of blind rage you attacked and killed him. I suggest you choked him with your hands; then, beside yourself with fear of discovery, you took him to the road above Fish Creek Canyon and from the bridge coldbloodedly hurled him to the rocks below, hoping thus to hide your crime—to make his death seem the result of accident. Returning to this town yesterday afternoon, you stopped at the post office to see if there was any mail for you. You wanted to create the impression you had just come north from Sonora. Last night, still in an effort to obtain the concealed location of Jake Miller's mine, you went to Esteban Boyero, knowing his son to be a friend of Jake's and tried to force the secret out of him. Of course Don Esteban was unaware of the mine's location, but you did not know this. You would not believe him when he told you he knew nothing of it. He was an old man; you easily overcame him, bound him, tortured him. You stripped his boots off, put a candle's flame to his bare feet. You were racking your mind to find some more effective form of persuasion when you heard footsteps in the patio. What was the life of an old Mexican when contrasted to your safety? While he lay there, bound, gagged, defenseless, you whipped a knife from your belt and shoved it into him up to the hilt. The steps were outside the door. Frantic lest you be found there with your victim, you sprang to the window."

Stanislau's lips in that utter quiet framed a sinister smile. "Unfortunately, my friend, you were not quite quick enough. You hadn't the time to arrange things that you had when you killed Jake Miller. You were seen, Mister Haywire Action Haynes, and by God you are going to hang!"

CHAPTER XIV

HAYNE'S schooled face was composed as ever, but the hard bronzed look of his cheeks was much less noticeable than it had been before Vic Stanislau's so-plausible reconstruction of two deaths. Staring into that sea of avid faces, Haynes knew a sudden chill. The blood lust had been loosed upon this room and it was all about him; in the dark, flushed scowls of menfolks, in the women's hungry faces. The calculant coroner had flogged the crowd's emotions; little more was needed to turn it into a mob—precious little, Haynes thought. He could not doubt it. Already there were rumblings. From several points the snarled word 'Rope!' hissed up at him.

He saw Penny Anders' frightened features, the open-mouthed stare of Flasker, the vindictive gleam of Bill Graham's eyes, the ironical twist of Sam Smith's mouth. They were all there, stabbing him with their eyes, weighing him, passing judgment. He saw Postmaster Tatum with his Yankee face like granite; read the bitter forecast in the set of Chortham's cheeks.

There may have been little evidence, little proof, in those suggestive words so glibly strung and offered by the coroner's agile tongue, but flimsy as the case might

be, Haynes knew he could not break it. This was his home, his native land, but those he'd known were gone or dead; of those who'd known him none were left. It was his word against Vic Stanislau's—his word against the calculant perjury of the men determined to frame him. All across this Southwest country carpetbagger justice had raised its polecat smell, and Haynes, removed from it, had shrugged, less than half believing the wild reports of drifting riders. Now he was face to face with it.

Whatever the private interests that before had moved San Tatum to intervene, those considerations were not operative now; the declaration was on Tatum's cheeks, was etched in the heightened vigilance of the Yankee's reticent regard.

Haynes' covert glance swept round to where Lupe Boyero sat between Bat Galva and the so-eccentric Britisher. But the long dark lashes hid her eyes away from him and there was no key on her face to what thoughts she was thinking. Well, he gave her credit; she had wanted—had wanted desperately to help him, and he had shaken his head at her. He could not take that help at her expense. Who knew but what Vic Stanislau had been gloatingly hoping she would take that chance? Who knew what web these schemers had subtly woven for her snaring? One thing Haynes knew: she walked in danger great as any he was facing. The bushwhacker had not shot at her just to exercise his talent.

The thump of Stanislau's bung-starter roused Haynes from reflection. He had one final thought before the coroner spoke. It was hardly likely any of them had forgotten how last night in the marshal's office Stanislau had alibied him from the very charge they now were seeking to hang on him. They must have made allowance for it; but, however slim, it was a chance and Haynes meant to make the most of it. If he could not discredit the coroner's motives—

Tolliver growled: "What was that?"

Stanislau said: "Recall Miss Boyero to the stand."

She looked so small, so fragile in that bulky home-made chair—like a fairy princess trapped in the secret grotto of some ogre. And there was something ogreish in the way of Vic Stanislau stood suavely leering down at her. He said: "Isn't it true, Miss Boyero, that you knew this Haywire Haynes was in your uncle's house last night? Isn't it true you saw him there?"

She must have been expecting it, so ready was her answer. Her dark eyes flashed defiantly and she said loudly—almost too loudly: "No! No! I deed not see him an' he was not there!"

But she could not control her color. It called her words a lie; and Penny Anders, angry, surged tempestuously to her feet and shouted: "Of course he wasn't there!" She eyed the coroner scornfully. "How could he be? He was with me, takin' in the town, until that darnfool Galva grabbed him!"

Stanislau turned with lifted eyebrows, motioned Lupe to step down, said blandly smiling, "I'm afraid that tale won't wash, Miss Anders. One admires your impetuous gallantry even though one can't but decry your judgment. Unfortunately for your story, the evidence—"

"Do y'u call," she demanded witheringly, "the testimony of them two gun-totin' scalawags, Grepting an' Bender, evidence? Why, a kid in three-cornered pants 'ud have more sense'n to believe that pair!"

Stanislau shrugged amidst the general snicker. When this noise had somewhat abated he declared: "That was not the evidence I had in mind, ma'am. It happens we have concrete proof Mister Haywire Haynes was in Don Esteban's house last night. Proof that shows him to have been there at the time of Boyero's death—proof, I need hardly add, that allows us no chance of doubting Haynes' complicity."

HE SMILED upon her unctuously, then wheeled his look to Tolliver. "Call Haynes back to the stand."

Re-sworn, Haynes' steady regard considered the coroner inscrutably.

"The witness will kindly be seated."

"I'll take it standing," Haynes said grimly.

Though composed, Haynes' face was far less tranquil than it had been. His patience was wearing thin and a hard-held anger was becoming visible in the way he held his shoulders, in the lines about his mouth.

Stanislau shrugged; was about to speak when Haynes said: "How much further you figurin' to carry this farce? Last night you told Marshal Galva and other witnesses that I was in your barroom talking to Curly

Bill Graham at the time this doc has set for Esteban's killing. How—"

"I said I thought you were. It appears I was mistaken. Mister Graham tells me he did not converse with you last night anyplace—didn't even see you." The coroner smiled. "I made a mistake—"

"You're makin' one right now—a powerful bad one that's like to kick back an' go off in your face!"

"You can save your blustering," Stanislau said coolly. "I'm not to be intimidated. You can see—"

"I can see," Haynes snapped, "that all the sidewinders in this country ain't hidin' out under the bushes!"

"What do you mean by that?" snarled Stanislau, with a high roan color in his cheeks.

"There's a two-legged variety that's rompin' around some prominent," Haynes declared, and it was obvious from his look he meant to have it understood the coroner was one of the breed referred to.

Rage raked Stanislau's voice. He whipped a white and crackling something from his pocket. "Is this thing yours?" The hand that held it out of Haynes' reach trembled.

The packed room felt abruptly very large and still and cold to Haynes. That crumpled paper in the coroner's fist was the letter Jake Miller had sent him. Not the first one, but that other, the one he'd gotten from Tatum yesterday noontime at the post office—the same well-read one Smith had given back to him last night. But Haynes was not then wondering how Vic Stanislau had gotten it. His cold bright stare was riveted to what was spread across the envelope. A stain. A brown stain that could have but one grim meaning.

Blood!

Stanislau said wickedly: "That's all right, bucko. You don't have to answer—your name's right there on the envelope!" And he flung his shoulders round then, faced the jury. "This letter was found last night beneath Don Esteban's dead body. I'm going to pass it round among you. Look it over carefully—"

That far he got when Haynes' clenched right, brought ragefully up from his bootstraps, took him hard beneath the ear. The frantic force of it flung Stanislau clear around, drove him glassy-eyed three staggering backward steps to collapse abruptly into the startled front-bench watchers.

Tolliver and swearing Bat Galva grabbed hold of Haynes immediately; Galva pinioned his arms and the deputy shoved his sawed-off Greener's muzzle hard against Haynes' belly.

Haynes made no resistance. He stood there breathing hard with his still-bright, slitted eyes fixed vengefully where several perspiring spectators roughly labored to bring the coroner round.

Galva's snarled commands at last brought order out of chaos. The doctor dusted off his knees and pronounced Vic Stanislau's jaw broken, the coroner was revived and gradually the hubbub quieted.

His enemies had framed him and Haynes had played right into their hands. Wrists cuffed behind his back, he had little time to meditate upon the folly of his action. The jury reached an agreement without ever leaving their seats. The brought-in verdict was murder and was read in an utter quiet. Don Esteban Boyero, it was declared, had come to his violent end at the hands of one Haywire Haynes; and it was urgently recommended that said Haynes be placed in custody at once and without privilege of bail.

CHAPTER XV

TWO-STORIED was Greaterville's new courthouse, and built of adobe brick; solid walls that were two feet thick and grimly decorated with thumb-width iron bars, packed overland at great expense from 'Frisco, embedded at two-inch intervals in every slotlike groundfloor window. Technically speaking, the town had neither the need nor the right to erect a courthouse; no county had its seat there. But this was a large free country and even folks so far away as Prescott looked resignedly for Greaterville to grow. So it builded for the future and, meantime, pulled every string it could.

The largest downstairs room was set aside for the use of the circuit judge who, at greatly irregular intervals, managed to include the place in his itinerary. Othertimes this chamber was preempted by Coroner Stanislau, who was a rather busy man these days; and when he had no need for it the town held meetings there. The rest of the building's ground floor was given over to a mercantile establishment save for three stuffy pigeonholes which were rented at exorbitant prices to the town's top-flight

professionals, Lawyer Billings, Doctor Sam Tremblor, and Mr. James E. Roberts, Apache Agent for Indian Affairs, who found life at Camp Apache rather boring to a man of his accomplishments and, like Caesar's wife, reserved to himself decisions on what he could and could not do.

The upper floor was where disturbers of the peace and other malcontents were kept. Generally speaking, killings in Greaterville got the killers either grabbed by the hand in hearty approbation, or promptly, and with equal heartiness, hanged by the neck until dead. No allowance had been made by the building's designers for the incarceration of such hombres; and so the holding of Haywire Haynes presented something of a problem until Bill Graham made a few suggestions.

The days passed slowly. There was extraordinarily little that Haynes could do; get up, sit down; get up, lie down; get up and tramp the narrow confines allowed him by the six-foot chain affixed between his leg-irons and a monstrous staple hammered solidly into the floor. That was all save when, occasionally, Little Casino, the friendly jailer, played a few hands of cards with him upon the heavy, pine-slab table moved over for the purpose. All other times there was nothing within Haynes' handcuffed reach save the iron cot they'd brought up for him and bolted to the floor.

It was a big room where they kept him, directly above the courtroom, and except for the things just mentioned—plus a good stout chair for the guard—was utterly bare of furnishings. There was a fireplace at one end and the room was lighted by six tall windows. No bars had been placed at these openings for the jump to the ground was a stiff one and opportunity for taking it simply did not exist. Besides being chained and shackled hand and foot, Haynes was under constant surveillance of the armed guards set to watch him. There were two of these—Little Casino and Clem Tolliver, the deputy marshal; they'd little else to do but watch him and they took the job on shifts. With Casino it was a duty, but it was plain Clem Tolliver enjoyed it and he overlooked no opportunity of letting Haynes know this fact.

Haynes had recalled at last where he'd seen the man before. It had been two years ago in C. Juarez, and the occasion had been a minor rebellion during which Haynes and his Circle Star rannies had been called upon by the authorities to help in restoring order. Haynes had happened personally to be responsible for Tolliver's capture and the man had not forgotten it. How he'd ever gotten clear was more than Haynes could imagine, for the Mexican way with such as he was usually swift and permanent.

Incarceration was bleaching the tan off Haynes' high cheeks and they were becoming gaunt as the rest of him. Confinement did not agree with him; he was an outdoor man and accustomed to keeping himself occupied. Daily his looks grew more somber and more than once his guards saw his glance going towards the windows and they kept their eyes skinned vigilantly. They watched and they suspected, but they had no way of being really certain what went on behind the smoke of Haynes' gray stare.

At first he had joked with his jailers, chaffing them with their care, presenting a cheerfully confident mien, declaring the walls had not been erected that could long keep him inside. But as the slow days dragged away he grew more taciturn, seldom smiling. He would sit for hours upon his cot, moodily staring at some window, and these days he no longer rose to Tolliver's sardonic baiting; the deputy's choicest and most studied insults seemed powerless now to move him. It was as though he did not hear them, so fixed and remote had been his gaze. If this lessened Tolliver's satisfaction, his actions gave no sign of it; he continued with a malicious pertinacity, doing everything in his power to make Haynes' life supremely miserable. Several times when outside pounding filled the place with clamor, the deputy, with mocking grin, turned to talk of scaffold-building, of hangmen's ropes and traps that stuck, and called up from the past every necktie party he'd been in on and a deal of others he had heard of. "But don't you worry, bucko," he would say, "the chances are, your lynchin' will come off without no hitch. Course, if you don't crave to wait that long, you kin always try for a getaway." And he would flash his jeering grin at Haynes and fondly pat his shotgun.

SO THE long days dragged their hours away, monotonous, uneventful. The droning of some lazy fly became a thing to listen to; the rumble of passing wagons;

the outside shouts and laughter. But mostly it was quiet here, hushed and solemn as only the wastelands' farflung reaches can be, still with the stillness of the country's vast immensity. It was quiet here, but there was no peace—no peace for Haywire Haynes.

Early on the first morning of his imprisonment Haynes had a visitor. San Tatum with his Yankee face unreadable as Old Baldy. With Tolliver saturninely watching from a short ten feet away, the postmaster commented on the unseasonableness of the weather, of sundry doings about the town, of the possible date when Judge Meyers might get around to hold Haynes' preliminary hearing. He asked if there were anything he might do regarding the prisoner's comfort. Haynes thanked him, told him no, and Tatum with a long grim look turned and clumped off down the stairs; a tall stooped man, unreadable as granite, clad in clothes the meanest range tramp would have scorned.

Haynes couldn't figure him. He was certain Tatum's quashing of Galva's first two attempts to arrest him had not been actuated by any mere love of fair play; and yet....

He shrugged Tatum out of mind. The Yankee was beyond his solving.

But there was no enigma about Curly Bill Graham who came plowing up the stairs through Tatum's wake. He was a romantic-looking devil with his big and chunky shoulders, jolly face and dancing eyes. In his chaps, blue shirt and tall white hat, he looked a regular backlands Lochinvar; but there wasn't an ounce of romance in him. Curly Bill was strictly business.

He grinned briefly, meeting Haynes' eye; said crisply without preliminary: "I got you in here, Mister; I can get you out. It's up to you. I'm after information. Do we trade or don't we?"

"What do you want?"

"I want the location of Miller's mine."

Haynes' stare revealed a grudging admiration. "You're frank—"

"Of course I'm frank," Graham grunted. "When I want a thing, I go after it. I usually get what I'm after, too. I'm goin' to get this mine—with your help or without it. What's it goin' to be?"

Haynes shook his head. "You're framin' the wrong guy, Graham. I know less about that mine than any—"

Snorting, Graham leaned forward. His eyes were hard as jet. "Do you like the prospect of hangin'? Then don't talk like it. I don't give a damn what that connivin' Yankee told you—I can get you out of this! I can bust them charges against you! Of course," he said thinly, ominously, "if you want to be obstinate, you can pack your goddam secret where Jake an' Boyero packed theirs. I've still got Rodriguez. You better make your mind up, bucko. I'm goin' to have that mine!"

Haynes' eyes met Bill Graham's straightly. "Better hop at it, then. You're wastin' your time around here."

The smile went out of Bill Graham's stare. He said so soft it was ugly: "That your last word, bucko?"

A quiet derision marked Haynes' regard, and suddenly, mordantly, he laughed.

NEXT day at noon, Big Berta came with a basket under her arm. The sound of wrangling at the foot of the stairs was the first knowledge Haynes had that the guard in sight was not the only one receiving pay to make sure the town's star guest stayed put. Little Casino was with him and they could hear Clem Tolliver's snarling with Berta's jaunty "tut-tut" tones shoving free-as-you-please right through it. Berta, apparently, knew men too well to let Clem Tolliver ruffle her. Up the stairs she sailed and like a full-rigged brig puffed into the room with her gold teeth flashing cheerfully.

"Hello there, boy! How're these fly-by-nights treatin' you? No better'n they have to, I expect," she said with a scornful sniff at Tolliver. She set her basket on Haynes' cot, lifted its fold of linen off and was preparing to unhatch its cargo when Tolliver, with an ugly scowl, laid rougly hold of her arm.

"See here!" he snarled. "For the last time, woman, I'm tellin' you—"

"Bosh!" Big Berta continued imperturbably her task of unloading the basket.

Tolliver, swearing, reached again to lay hold, and the fat madam of the tenthouse reared up like a bear. She stood with big arms akimbo, bosom heaving angrily. "Avast, you scum! Have a care who you're grabbin' at!"

But the deputy was beside himself at the way she ignored his authority. Throwing caution to the winds, he snarled: "Pick up your junk an' get out of here or I'll

get you rode out on a rail! Git, God damn you, 'fore I run you outa camp!"

"Oh! So you'll be runnin' me out of the camp, eh? You an' who else?" she said witheringly. "That bill-chargin', never-pay boss of yours, I guess! It'll be a great day!" she sniffed, wrinkling her nose like a rabbit's. "An' where'll he be gettin' that eighty-five bucks he's been owin' me, eh? Think awhile on that, you polecat!"

She turned her back contemptuously, began setting out the dishes. "Go right ahead, dearie," she told Haynes cheerfully. "Better eat it now while Berta's here to keep an eye on that half pint of treachery."

So, with Berta and the deputy eying each other like a couple of back-fence tomcats, Haynes waded into the best meal he'd eaten since the town of Greaterville had taken him in charge. Steak smothered in onions, strong black coffee scalding hot, home-made biscuit and mashed potatoes, carrots and peas and a pair of corn fritters; and to top it all off, on a separate plate, was a big slab of pumpkin pie. God only knew where Berta had dug up that pumpkin, but it certainly hit the spot; as Haynes told her when he'd finished.

In this camp such a meal must have cost a fortune and Haynes had nothing with which to repay it. Galva, when placing him under arrest, had lifted all his pocketable belongings. But even had he still the wherewithal, he guessed she'd be insulted if he ventured to make the offer. So he thanked her as best he could and reserved her a fond place in his memory.

"Sure, an' that's all right, dearie." She beamed. "It does my auld heart good to see a man eat proper. And anyway I've no right to your thanks. 'Tis little enough I've done, you'll say; 'twas Miz Penny fixed it with her own two hands—an' a fine upstanding lady she is, though she does go round in men's pants. But never let on I told you," she said hastily. "She made me swear not to tell you on everything she holds holy, an' I'd not be wanting to lower myself in so fine a lady's regard."

Haynes stared. "You say Penny Anders cooked this for me?"

"Sure an' she did that, so. But the likes of this hydrophoby skunk wouldn't let her up here with it—wouldn't even let her see you, blast 'em!" she said with a truculent glare at Clem Tolliver. "Well, I must be getting on," she said, and began gathering up the dishes.

IT WAS eight-fifteen the next morning when Casino called up there was company. "What—again?" growled Tolliver, scowling. "A fella'd think you was royalty or somethin', the way they're wearin' them stairs out," he said with a glare at Haynes. "Who is it?" he called; and Casino said: "Tatum," and the deputy picked up his shotgun, laying it grimly across his lap.

The Yankee's stare when he came into the room eyed the watchful Tolliver without favor. "How about taking a walk," he suggested, thrusting his hand toward his pocket.

But like a flash the shotgun's muzzle jumped to focus. "Not on your tintype!" Tolliver snarled. "An' git your hand away from that pocket!"

Tatum's brows climbed up his forehead, then he turned his back indifferently. "There's a lot of rough talk going on," he told Haynes, "and a lot of free drinks flowing across the bars. If I could figure a way, I'd get you out of here pronto. I don't like it. There's somebody trying to get you hanged—someone too anxious to wait for the judge or afraid you'll someway get out of it. What's Stanislau got against you, boy?"

Haynes shrugged, but his eyes went thoughtful, narrowed.

It went, he thought, much deeper than that. That Stanislau was vindictive he could not doubt; the man would be glad to see Haynes swung, but it would be Curly Bill that was back of it. And yet—why? The outlaw's spite, and Stanislau's, too, should have been satisfied by putting Haynes where he was. So far as he could see, the case they'd worked up was airtight; conviction was practically certain. Why not let the law's wheels do the grinding? Jake Miller's mine, Haynes reflected grimly, was looming more and more important.

As though reading his thoughts, Tatum said: "They're calling it the Lost Dutchman now. If you know anything about it, you'd better be airin' it quick-like. A hole in the ground, no matter how rich, don't hardly seem worth the risk you're taking—"

Haynes said shortly: "You know as much about that mine as I do—if not more. Hell,

I haven't even seen Jake, much less talked to him. I—"

Tatum said softly with his hard lips barely moving: "Don't stall, boy—it's too damned late for stalling. Jake left that mine to you. Must've known they had his number up. Remember that letter from him I gave you at the post office?"

"I've never even read that letter," Haynes said harshly. Then sharply, remembering the unsealed condition of its envelope: "Have you?"

Tatum's head barely moved, but that move was affirmative. His lips shaped words that had no sound. "There was a quitclaim in it made out to you and a map in an inside envelope—"

"What're you two up to?" Tolliver snarled. "If there's any talkin' on the schedule, it'll be done public—out loud where I kin hear it! Get me?" he said, glaring at Tatum; but the Yankee just looked at him coldly.

"There's nothing wrong with my hearing—"

"What was you tellin' Haynes?"

"I was telling him I'm taking the stage to Prescott tomorrow to have a talk with the Governor. I'll speak to him about you, too, if it'll make you feel any better." And with a curt good night to Haynes, he left.

"There's another one down here," Casino called. "Says his name is Smith—"

With a curse, Tolliver announced where Smith could go, and Haynes had no more visitors. But he'd plenty of food for thought, all right, and that night slept not at all. Tiredly, angrily, bitterly he kept reviewing the inescapable conclusion pointed out by Tatum's disclosure. Jake had left him the mine—this marvelous seven-day wonder whose secret had cost him his life; whose secret had cost Don Esteban's life and was very likely to cost Haynes' own. There was the thing in a nutshell. Instead of a blessing, it was a curse the Old Dutchman had saddled him with—a white elephant whose very possession spelled doom.

He saw all too clearly now—could no longer doubt—why he was focal point for so many mad conspiracies. Smith and Tatum both had claimed there was a map in Jake's letter; but Sam Smith had made it plain the map hadn't been there when he'd got the letter!

Where was it, then? Who had it? That somehow Tatum had not examined the map was obvious. Why hadn't he? He'd admittedly opened Jake's letter; had his Yankee caution been too great to permit—

Haynes guessed something then. Chortham and Tatum were teamed in this. It had been Tatum's intention for Chortham to win Haynes' confidence. Reading Jake's letter with this thought in mind, Tatum had seen no need to risk detection further by opening the inner sealed envelope. The outer envelope might have come unstuck, but for both to have been open would have spelled malicious and deliberate intent; would have laid Tatum open to a charge of having tampered with the government mails.

Haynes grinned at the ceiling sourly. Tatum's shrewd and Yankee caution had defeated him. How galling it must be for Greaterville's postmaster to feel that he had missed getting hold of Old Jake's fabulous mine by just that little much!

But somebody had that map! Somebody would be on their way muy pronto—not to stake the property but to gut it. For no man would dare lay claim to that treasure now; too many knew it had been willed to Haynes....

Haynes' mind clicked on incessantly. All through the long night hours he lay there thinking, thinking, thinking. But by the morning he had made his plans.

He would cultivate Little Casino.

CHAPTER XVI

THE thrust and sweep of the blue Santa Rita peaks where south of Tucson they rimmed the desert floor, the graceful wheeling of some occasional eagle riding the winds in the lesser blue that hemmed them—these were Haynes' contacts with the world beyond the courthouse walls; these were what he saw of it. And they were just about all he could see.

The nearest window was fourteen feet from the play of his chain and it held for him what appeared to be a dreary fascination. More and increasingly more his time was spent with his face turned toward it, with taciturn gaze fixed broodingly upon those rimming hills beyond. There was a hunger in this man that Little Casino could understand, for he'd been a rider himself in his day and that day was not so long past. He, too, felt the call of the

wind and stars, the lure of the wasteland spaces. The spell of the open was in his blood. He knew how Haynes must be chafing; knew what it was to remember.

Many times he had noticed the vindictiveness of Tolliver's dealings with the man, had seen the black look in his eyes and had wondered about it idly. But if they shared a common past, the prisoner gave no sign of it; he took the deputy's taunts and jibes, his calculated cruelties, with an indifference that amazed Casino, the more so when he thought back, as quite frequently he did, to Haynes' swift flare-up in the case of Coroner Stanislau. There had been a fire and spirit in Haynes that day that now was driven out of him.

Someway the knowledge effected change in Casino's relations with the prisoner. He took to talking with him more and discoursed ramblingly of his life on the range, of his days as a buffalo hunter, of his trip to Abiline last year; of Tombstone, Silver City and the high wild country east of it. Haynes seldom offered comment and there were times when Casino even wondered if he listened, so far off seemed his gaze. But someway he seemed appreciative and Casino learned to watch for that fleeting, tight-lipped smile that showed the man Haynes could be. It was like some fugitive gleam of sun comes scudding through dark timbered slopes. It drew the big man strangely.

They took to playing cards more frequently; it helped pass away the time, seemed like, and always they played casino, the craze for which had gotten the jailer his nickname. A burly, strapping fellow he was, with the muscles of a plowhorse; good-natured and slow to rile and not too quick with his think-box. But if he was sorry for Haynes with his ruined life, he was far from a fool and kept an eye cocked warily whenever within Haynes' reach.

But Haynes gave no trouble and peace is contagious, and slowly, gradually, its influence was exerted, undermining the jailer's watchfulness. The card-playing habit became routine, Casino's talks grew more and more lengthily rambling. Chair propped against a post, cigarette hanging pendent from lips that no longer puffed it, he would sit with eyes half closed, with his thoughts in the buried yesterdays, digging out of their ashes near-forgotten tales with which to beguile Haynes' silence. For the big man knew from his own past life how memory's hurting power was strongest when twilight's long dark shadows come stealing across the land.

More than once the surly Tolliver warned him angrily not to play cards with the prisoner. "You goddam fool!" he'd say. "One of these times you'll look up from your hand to be swingin' a shovel in hell!" He even took it up with Galva, but the marshal shrugged his shoulders. "Casino's free, white an' double twenty-one. If he wants to play cards, I don't see what's goin' to stop him—"

"You're Greaterville's marshal, ain't you?"

"Sure; but Casino was appointed by the Sheriff—I ain't got no say over him. Long's he does his work all right, he can tell me to go to hell."

Tolliver glared at him sulkily, but there the matter rested.

BEHIND the studied aloofness of Haynes' grim taciturnity was a careful, shrewd and well-considered logic. He knew routine's monotony, routine's insidious power; the sails of his every action were trimmed to this advantage. With subtlety and foresight he played on Casino's good nature. Without appearing to do so he encouraged the jailer's loquacity, built up the card-playing habit. Three times a day he was watchfully escorted to the latrine out back and on these trips he was extra careful, without showing it, to give no cause for alarm. It was on these trips he was well aware that they'd be looking for him to try something, that their vigilance was bound to be sharpest. Haynes' brooding stare sought the far horizons hungrily but the set of his shoulders told them he had given up hope of escape.

Tolliver grinned derisively.

"What's the matter, bucko? I thought you was a curly wolf! You act more like a goddam sheep—where's all that sand your craw was full of?" His spiteful laugh rang jeering. "Hell!" he said, and spat. "Mild as Mary's lamb!"

There was a quick, hard glitter in Haynes' veiled stare, but Tolliver did not notice.

Haynes had discovered by now that his card-playing with Casino, though plentifully frowned upon, would not be stopped; that Casino, owing his job to the sheriff, held no very high opinion of the Greater-

ville marshal's office and cooperated with it only so far as he had to. These facts were duly pigeon-holed with the other facts Haynes had gathered; and the long days dragged lethargically on.

There was, of course, a danger that Vic Stanislau or someone else might drink the town into a hanging; but that risk had to be taken. Cutting loose of his predicament presented problems not to be solved in the wink of any ground squirrel's eye. Bat Galva would have told you escape wasn't in the cards.

But Galva had a lot to learn.

The fourth day following Tatum's second visit dawned bright and clear. It stayed clear, but along about mid-morning a haze came up, blue and sultry with the promise of increased heat. Tolliver had the windows all open and his chair moved up to the nearest. There was no breeze and the building's tin roof trapped the heat. Sweat dampened Haynes' shirt and the shine of it was on his face.

"Don't tell me you're gettin' hot," Tolliver jabbed at him. "What'll you do after that lynchin' comes off an' they put you to stokin' hell's furnace? Or mebbe," he said with a wink and a leer, "you'll not be waitin' for that hangin,' eh?" He laughed. "I wouldn't, either, 'f I was you. I'd pull outa this dump in a hurry."

Haynes didn't answer; didn't even look up from the hunched way he sat drearily eying his boots.

"Now look—" Tolliver went on with his baiting. "Would you wanta deprive a hard-workin' star-packer of what little pleasure his job can afford?" He patted his Greener affectionately. "I've got ol' Betsy Ann here loaded plumb up to the gizzard—nails an' rock salt an' three-four pieces of thumb-sized lead, a screw or two an' a mort o' good black powder to speed 'er off with. Looks like if you had any human feelin's about you at all, you'd be wantin' to see the explosion. Hell," he scoffed, "I mightn't even hit you! You might git clear away!"

He laughed uproariously at the likelihood. The prospect entertained him for several moments. Then he said disgustedly: "If it was me they had penned up here waitin' a hangin', I'd sure as hell try it on, by Gawd!"

Haynes went on with his brooding, ignoring the deputy utterly.

Tolliver glowered. "Of all the spineless critters! What does a man hev to do to git a rise out of you anyway? What are you usin' for guts these days—fiddle strings? Hell, they told me you was a tough one! A yearlin' girl would show more guts than you got! You sure did hev them greasers fooled; they think down there you're a real he-catamount with forty-seven rings in your tail! All you got's a single stripe, an' it runs clear down your back!"

CASINO clumped up the stairs at noon to watch Haynes while the deputy marshal went out to fill his belly. Tolliver got up and stretched, made a great show of leaning his shotgun against the wall just out of the prisoner's reach. "Keep your eye on that gun, boy, an' just remember," he grinned, "that right there, cocked an' ready, is the load that's goin' to blast you off to hell any time you figure to leave here!"

With a jeering laugh, he tossed the shackle keys at Casino and went swaggering off to eat.

Casino looked after him with a scowl but kept his thoughts to himself. His face ironed out as he caught Haynes' grin. "That's the spirit, boy; don't let that sidewinder get you down," he said. "Want to go out back?"

Haynes shook his head.

"Hungry yet?"

"Too damned hot to eat," Haynes said. "Let's play a couple hands of cards. Got any of them matches left you won off me last night?"

"You bet," Casino chuckled, and went to fetch the table.

Big and awkward, heavy it was, beyond Clem Tolliver's lifting. Casino puffed a bit himself as he put it down between them, brought a deck of greasy cards from a pocket and a couple handfuls of matches which he divided with the prisoner. He pulled up the chair still warm from Tolliver's roosting, and Haynes, as had become his custom, parked one hip on the table's far end and gave the deck a riffle. It was pretty awkward work, cuffed the way he was, and Casino, after a hand or two, would usually take off Haynes' bracelets.

He did so now.

The first hand Haynes won; the next

two went to Casino. Haynes' mind seemed to have wandered off as more increasingly of late it did. Poor devil, Casino thought. It was pretty tough being caged like this, for a man so used to the open.

They never kept the game with a pencil; just added a match to their piles for each point scored. Fifteen minutes' play saw Casino's pile showing growth. It would be but a matter of moments now till the man was engrossed completely.

As though unaware of it, Haynes' sleeve brushed a match off the table.

This was no accident. This was the test, and it furnished the hoped-for evidence. Casino did not look up!

This was the anticipated moment, the goal of all Haynes' planning. And he was ready for it. His blood churned like a millrace, but his nerves were cold as gun steel; cold and steady and keenly efficient like the hand that, as he leaned forward across the table, groped for and retrieved the match while his glance stayed glued to his cards.

Casino had two big piles built up and all his faculties were concentrated into making sure Haynes didn't copper them. It is doubtful if he noticed the prisoner's byplay, if he did, Haynes' casualness pulled the teeth from his vigilance. He planked a ten-spot on the largest pile and triumphantly raked it in; the play grabbed eight cards, three of them spades, and he took it with the big casino. He chuckled.

Haynes cursed under his breath—swore again as his sleeve hooked into his match pile and dumped it onto the floor.

"I'll get 'em," Casino said, and bent.

Haynes' move was lightning. A blur of motion, the rasp of steel on leather and Casino, gone still as stone, was staring into the ugly snout of his own cocked pistol.

A tiger grin spread Haynes' tight mouth, but the look of his eyes was deadly.

"Just fetch out the key, Casino, an' while you're down there, ease my legs of them shackles."

Casino's slimmed stare took a long grim look, then he let his breath out gently. What he had read in the prisoner's eyes must have been potent—convincing. Without demur, he unlocked Haynes' irons, laid them gently on the floor.

"Many thanks, comparde — gracias!" Haynes smiled. "Now stand over against that wall— not that— Hell's fire!"

But the talking stage was past. Casino, with a courage born of desperation, had jumped for the stairs—was already halfway down them. With pounding heart Haynes crouched at their top, pistol lifted, ready to fire. He should fire! Every fibre of his being urged him to drop the fleeing jailer before it was too late.

But he shook his head; with a disgusted oath rammed the pistol into his Levis and was turning when the street door slammed. He heard the shouts, the babbled questions, the high-pitched furious cursing of Clem Tolliver—a shot.

Grabbing up the shotgun left against the wall Haynes sprang to the nearest window; saw Casino reeling drunkenly with a bright red splotch upon his shirtfront, saw the scurrying frantic figures that were bolting from the walks—saw the crouched, black shape of Tolliver with the smoke still spiralling from his gun.

"Tolliver!"

Haynes called it through bared teeth with the red rage glowing on his cheekbones. Tolliver's shotgun was across the sill and as Tolliver's head came up it barked.

You could see the dust leave Tolliver's vest as the double load smashed him backward. His arms flailed out and his spine arched back and he fell with the wild scream gagging in his throat.

CHAPTER XVII

HAYNES' stare raked the street with a wicked probing. Empty—cleared as though by magic! No sign of life upon it. No blur of movement anywhere. Gone, every blasted one of them! Gone behind the quickest shelter to spy and peep from cracks and crannies, to peer one-eyed from window corners while they fondled their guns and prayed to catch some view of him that with speed they could safely target. Haynes was not deceived. They would send him where he'd sent that murderous Tolliver, the moment he showed in a doorway—and get a medal for it, probably!

He cursed Clem Tolliver bitterly. But for the deputy's untimely return, Haynes might even now be throwing dust—might be putting this town behind him in a rocketing tear for the badlands, for the chaos of rock-strewn gulches through which no trailer could track him.

Still muttering, Haynes crossed the long bare room with his bootsteps echoing hollowly.

The backyard loomed empty as the street out front. Nothing moved between it and the gulch wall forty feet away; nothing showed but the blaze of sun, the discarded litter of rusty cans and the hard-baked ground beneath them—the sand-scoured walls of the privy that gauntly rose from out of it.

But Haynes was too old in trouble's ways to trust that barren landscape. To him this desolation spelled not safety but a trap—a baited trap thrice ringed by watching, avid eyes. Like enough, some fool crouched gun in hand behind that privy door. All the scene needed to touch it off was the sight of Haynes at some opening.

Jaws hard clenched Haynes pondered, scanned his chances. Not even that one chance in a million that he had ever been willing to take seemed here vouchsafed him. Feeling—fanned by Graham's lies and Stanislau's charges—was running too high. They'd hang him now, all right, if they caught him.

"But first you got to catch your rabbit," Haynes muttered; and, cursing, whirled as quick steps sent their clatter up the stairs.

He lifted the pistol, cat-eyed, malicious. Trained it on the stairwell with a hand that showed no tremor; held the hammer back and waited.

The steps came on and Haynes, going back a step, suddenly swore in startled wonderment. "Hell's fire, girl! Don't you know no better'n to—"

It was Penny Anders; and a thankful cry welled out of her as she saw he was still afoot. She was beside him then, touching him, trying to assure herself that he was indeed still among the quick, and with the anxious eyes of her peering up at him from the pallor of frightened features.

There was no doubting the sincerity of her anxiety. It made Haynes feel embarrassed, kind of; too, someway it made his pulse beat faster, and he said gruffly: "You ought to be hand-spanked an' put in the closet without no supper, comin' up here like that! Hell's fire, girl—don't you know this town's about to blow the lid off? What if them fools rush this place!"

Her eyes flashed scornfully. But then, almost instantly they gravened with remembrance. "Haynes, y'u got to git out of yere!" She said it urgently, pleadingly, almost. "Them coyotes are fixin' to git yo' scalp sure enough this time—"

"Shucks, they been fixin' to do that all along—"

She stood away from him, rigid, very erect and white of face. "Y'u got to listin', dang it! Them wolves are goin' to burn the cou'thouse—y'u got to git out of yere pronto!"

"Goin' to burn it, are they?" Haynes said grimly. "Reckon it'll be a kind of expensive bonfire—for the ones that's picked to light it. There ain't nothin' wrong with my shootin' hand an'—"

"Y'u won't never git no chance to shoot! They got this town worked up somethin' awful! Minute y'u show yo' face at a window, Haynes, y'u'll be a dead man! They got fo'ty rifles trained on this place—Dang y'u, Haynes, I seen 'em!" she cried, eyes flashing. "I heard Curly Bill tellin' off the men—he's a-settin' right now at a upstairs window of the Antler House with a fo'ty-five ninety on his knee! An' y'u can' git out the back way because he's got Flash Nellrose an' ten of his brass-collar bushwhackers bellyin' the rim jest waitin' fo' y'u to show!"

Haynes raked her with a probing glance; said drily then: "O. K. I'm obliged to you, ma'am. Reckon you better be moseyin' on now before some of them wolves out there commence unravelin' lead—"

"Mosey fiddlesticks!" she said with a quick grim look. "If y'u think all I come up yere fo' was to warn y'u, Mister Man, y'u sho' got another think comin'. Peel outa them clo's now an' hurry it up!"

"Peel—huh! Did you say—"

"Y'u heerd me! Shuck outa them clo's an' don't stop to do no argyin'—"

"I'll be damned if I will," Haynes growled, with cheeks gone red as his scarf. "Ma'am, I'm sure some—."

"Don't be any more of a idjit than y'u kin help!" she stormed. "I spent a lot of sweat figerrin' this thing out an' I hev gone to a mort o' trouble about it, an' I don't aim to hev the whole thing ruined by any balkin' fool of a gun fighter. Y'u kin do as y'u gol durn please, but I'm takin' my clo's off anyhow, an' if you s'much as blink at me whiles I'm a-doin' it, I'm—"

Haynes did not listen any further but hurriedly turned his back, because even as she spoke her hands were busy with sundry hooks and buttons. He would sooner have

been found dead or tied with his neck on a railroad track than get dyked out in a woman's ruffles; but it looked like he hadn't much choice in the matter. Penny Anders was the most determined female he had ever run across and it looked like the quickest way to get shut of her was to quit fighting the bit and let her have her way.

He hadn't noticed it first off, but now that he had time to cogitate a moment, he recollected that she'd not been dressed in her cowboy rig but had on a flouncy printed gingham, and the pale blue strings of a big sunbonnet had been tied in a bow beneath her chin. It made Haynes squirm to think of being tricked out in a rig like that; but there was no choice in the matter. Either he did as Penny wanted or she'd be here on his hands when they rushed the place. With a smothered oath, he commenced divesting himself of his outers.

"Hurry it!" she bade, voice fierce with the clutch of emotion. "Y'u ain't got no time for lally dallyin'—throw me yo' shirt an' Levis an' keep yo' eyes on the wall!"

"THAT ain't no way to tie a bow! Sakes alive! Hold yo' chin up! There!" She stood back to survey her handiwork, reluctantly nodding a frowning approval. "Y'u look more like a scarecrow, I reckon; but if y'u kin make out to walk without that saddlebound swagger an'll keep this-yere bonnet brim—"

The squeal and creak of the street door's hinges stopped her in mid-sentence. The turquoise eyes showed a film of terror as she stared up into Haynes' face with cheeks gone pale as wood-ash. Even in that urgent moment Haynes could not but scarcely admire the stirring picture that she made with her red curls framed by his black Stet-hat. The pallor of her but accentuated the pulse-jumping contrast of red lips parted over pearly teeth.

Then she was clutching him, squeezing his arms with her fingers, urging him toward the door. She reached up to give a final tug to the poke bonnet's rim and, "God help us," she whispered; and sped to show herself in Haynes' togs fleetingly at the window facing on the street to assure the cat-eyed watchers that their man was still trapped in here.

The clump of boots thumped up the stairs. Haynes growled, "Dammit, Penny! I can't leave you here to—"

"Git! Dag-gone it, y'u git," she hissed, "or—"

"Haynes!"

It was Smith's voice, calling up the stairwell.

"It's me, Haynes—Two-Bits Smith. Hold your fire. I'm comin' up—is that fool girl still up there?"

"Yes, but I'm comin' straight-away down," declared Penny loudly, making motions at Haynes. "I give up! Of all the mule-stubborn men I ever see—"

She left the rest trail off as though disgusted and shaped Haynes a final admonition with silent lips: "Behind Tatum's store—Big Berta'll hev a hoss theah fo' y'u—beat it!"

Sensing the desperation of her, Haynes closed his mouth and with head tipped forward so that the bonnet's rim pretty well concealed his features, he whipped Penny's dainty square of cambric to his face and, loudly blowing his nose, headed warily for the stairs.

Smith rammed past him on them, hardly giving him a glance, so engrossed were all his faculties on the prospective meeting with Haywire Haynes in the long bare room above. The gun fighter's hard-case features wore a look of cunning and guile, and he called out as Haynes went past him: "Hold your fire up there. I'm peaceable. Think I can git you out of this if you'll cooperate a little. We're holdin' most o' the trumps, you an' me, fella. All I want is your word to cut me in fifty-fifty an'—"

Haynes, at the bottom, pulled open the door and stepped out onto the street.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE hot metallic smash of the noontime sun was like a hammer, but Haynes did not stop—did not even pause as he stepped into Greaterville's mile-long street. With a prayer that Penny would have the wit to keep her back to Smith as long as possible, he struck out for Tatum's store, walking leisurely as hammering heart would let him, keeping his head bent and with shoulders drooping doing his best to imitate Penny's gait.

He could feel the impact of unseen eyes briefly conning him; then the feel of them was gone and he knew they had accepted him at the face value of his raiment and

again had wheeled their wicked attention to the windows of the courthouse jail.

He hastened the pace a little, hastened it much as he dared.

He was almost to Tatum's store—could read the small print of the Yankee's sign—and in him there was a malicious satisfaction at the prospect of these Greaterville wolves' chagrin on learning how they had been tricked, when scuffle sound abruptly burst from the courthouse windows; and on its heels, even towering through it, Smith's cursing, rageful voice. And suddenly his shout: "Quick! He's got away! That's him running in that damn' girl's clothes!"

One instant of startled silence smashed the street like a butcher's maul. Then Bill Graham's angry bellow sailing high and wild across it: "There he goes, you fools—makin' for the back of Tatum's! Drop him! God damn it—" The rest was lost in the sharp, flat crash of a rifle ripping up the echoes and spraying Haynes' boots with dust.

With a bedlam of noise all about him, Haynes raced down that can-littered alley, vaulted the adobe wall and was inside Tatum's freighting compound with Big Berta's wind-whipped figure rushing his own white-stockinged buckskin up; thrusting the reins in his hands.

"Good luck to you, boy, an'—ride like hell!" Berta told him; and he was swinging into the saddle when Tatum's back door came open to show the scoop-shaped jaw of Chortham leering across a lifted rifle. Chortham's finger curled round the trigger.

Haynes ducked and the shot whined across his shoulder; and then the six-guns Haynes had grabbed from Casino was heightening the clamor and Chortham was diving off the porch edge with the wind knocked out of his wailing and Haynes' spurless heels were drumming the buckskin's ribs and all was a chaos of flying confusion; and then Haynes was over the wall and racing for the hills.

THERE were still many things that he wanted to know—still much he did not properly understand about this business; but a few things were mighty clear. And clearest of these was the white-hot fact that if he aimed to keep on breathing he must dig for the tules in a hurry.

And he did.

But that didn't jam his think-box and his mind churned like a millwheel. Who had killed Esteban Boyero? Why hadn't Lupe tried to see him while he'd been chained up in the courthouse? Who was the unknown sharpshooter who had tried that night to drygulch her? Who had tried to drygulch himself that time as he'd stepped from the marshal's office? Where did Lupe Boyero fit into this crazy jigsaw? Why had Graham's crowd invaded Esteban's that first night when Haynes and Lupe had arrived to find the old man murdered and Haynes had left by the window.

Smith was not fooling Haynes any longer. Smith was working, if not for, then certainly with Bill Graham; and Graham was after Jake Miller's mine—the Lost Dutchman, as they now were calling it.

And Tatum—where did he fit in? It seemed pretty obvious that the Yankee also was doing his best to get his hooks into Miller's mine—Miller's? Hell, it was his mine now! The mine of Mister Haywire Haynes! For Tatum had claimed Old Jake had deeded or quit-claimed the diggings to Haynes in that letter the whole damn country but Haynes had read! But Tatum, despite his mistake in not having examined the map while he'd had it, was playing a pretty shrewd game—at least Tatum had been. Why had Chortham come tearing out to drop him? Had he been acting on his own hook and without or contrary to Tatum's orders?

"Not that it makes much difference," Haynes told himself grimly. "They're all out to down me—every mother's son of 'em! Nobody, even if they find it, will dare locate Jake's diggings while I'm alive to raise hell about it. So the word goes out: Get Haynes out of the way! An' a fellow's got to hand it to 'em—they're certainly doing their best!"

He wondered considerable about that map; about who had seen it, where it was and who had hold of it now. Whoever had it must know it was Haynes' property; that if Haynes ever discovered they had it, there would come a speedy reckoning. One thing was sure—he had better lose no time in getting his hands on Jake's quit-claim or deed or whatever it was the old man had used to make over the property to him.

With the thought came an instant other: Why not go after it now? Vic Stanislau, the coroner, had had it during the inquest—probably had it now; and who in the world

would be expecting Haywire Haynes to come larruping back into town? Nobody but an idiot, certainly! Every able-bodied man in forty miles would be scouring the hills for him—everyone but Stanislau, anyhow. Vic had not impressed him as a man who would take pleasure in anything so arduous; the owner of the Antler House was more the sort to sit back, like Tatum, and pull the strings while hombres less shrewd did the rough work.

Thinking of Tatum in conjunction with Vic Stanislau put another idea into Haynes' quick head. It was not a welcome one. Was, he reluctantly wondered, Lupe Boyero working in conjunction with Sam Tatum? It could be—oh, definitely! Haynes could not think, after that scene in which he'd found her with the coroner, that she could be working for Curly Bill's bunch. He was mighty reluctant to believe her working for anyone; but there was a deal about her he could not explain. And that hard-case cousin, Rodriguez—the "friend" of Old Jake Miller; what kind of part was Rodriguez playing in the general determination to grab onto Old Jake's mine?

To think with Haynes was to act, and with a tight, grim folding of his lips, he swung the buckskin's head to the left and lined him out in a great half-circle that would take them back into town, but into it from the direction of Tucson.

It was nearly four o'clock when Haynes turned the buckskin's hoofbeats back onto Greaterville's street. There were not many walkers about the town, though the inevitable wagons still cluttered the road and a mule-skinner's pack train was entering from the south. Haynes was not greatly worried about being recognized. Few of Greaterville's population had ever got a good look at him; probably the bulk of those who'd attended the inquest were still out in the hills hunting sign of him. And, anyway, mostly the kind of boomers hanging their hats in Greaterville had their minds too filled with their own affairs to worry overmuch about a fool outlander who had busted jail.

So with his hat pulled low across keen narrowed eyes, Haynes tied up his buckskin at the hitchrail fronting Tatum's place and clumped up the walk to the Antler House. The white-aproned gent on duty in the bar said he'd likely find Vic in his office.

Stanislau's cheeks went the color of well-aged cheese when he saw Haynes lounged in the doorway. His shoulders crowded the back of his chair and the long-fingered hands that gripped its arms showed white as the snow on Old Baldy. Shock pulled the hard lips back from his teeth.

"I can see," Haynes' drawl declared drily, "you are plumb overjoyed at beholdin' me, Vic."

Vic Stanislau sat very still.

"I expect you know what I've come for, Vic; but just to save time, I'll mention that I'm here for that letter of mine you was wavin' around at the inquest. And don't bother thinkin' up any lies because I'm not draggin' freight till I get it."

Stanislau must have believed it, must have seen bad danger in any prolongation of Haynes' visit; perhaps remembrance of the quick-knuckled fist Haynes had planted back of his ear at the inquest had its influence in the coroner's capitulation. Be that as it may, Vic Stanislau drew some papers from his coat pocket, thumbed through them and with expressionless face shoved a crumpled, bloodstained envelope without remark across the desk.

With one eye cocked for trouble, Haynes took inventory of the envelope's contents. It was the conveyance Tatum had spoken of, an instrument giving Haynes complete control of Jake Miller's mine. "I believe," Haynes mentioned quietly, "there was a letter in here also."

Stanislau's look went a little tighter but, thumbing through his papers again, he pushed another across to Haynes.

"Give you time an' you'll make the head of the class, Vic," Haynes said drily. "I'll take the map now."

Stock still, face blank as pounded metal, Vic Stanislau stood like a statue. He said at last, quite bitterly: "I haven't got it—what's more, I never have had it. I don't even know what it looks like."

Haynes believed him; said with quick-streaked grin: "Give my love to Galva, Vicky," and backing warily put a hand out for the door. The knob wasn't there—but something else was. He saw the leaping light in Stanislau's eyes and flung his body sideways just as a murderously glinting something lashed the place where he'd been standing.

He heard Bat Galva's grunted oath, heard the off-balanced marshal stagger; then his lowered head like a battering ram took Stanislau hard in the stomach and the cor-

oner jacknifed, went down in a heap as Haynes hurtled through the window.

He lit rolling and came up, face gone savage, with a gun. A long quick jump put him back beside the window just as Galva, swearing, thrust his head out. Haynes' down-swinging gun banged it nicely and the marshal folded across the sill.

With a hard, tight grin Haynes climbed back in just as, wheezily, Vic Stanislau was picking himself from the floor. The coroner's eyes came up and saw him—widened; the flush drained out of his face and left it haggard, white as his stock. "What—what now?" he muttered thickly.

Haynes leaned against the wall with gray eyes blank as a watching tiger's. "It's just come to me," he said, "you forgot to mention where that map was—"

"I don't know!" The coroner snarled it.

Haynes smiled grimly. "I'll just wait till you recollect," he drawled and rubbed his thumb on the gun hammer in a way that was coolly wicked.

Stanislau wilted. "That—that greaser Rodriguez's got it."

"An' how does it happen your crowd ain't jumped it off him?"

"Because he's gone, cleared out an' vanished—"

"An' where do you reckon he's vanished to?"

"To the mine, that's where, goddam you!" Stanislau jeered with a spite-roused nerve. "Go ahead—let's see you find him! By Christ, you're in the same boat we are!"

CHAPTER XIX

IT LOOKED like Stanislau was right. This was Haynes' considered opinion as, clad in the coroner's Prince Albert, beaver hat and gay striped trousers, he eased the buckskin down through the rolling footslopes, putting the turbulent mountains back of him, laying a course toward where the flat dun expanse of the desert lay between himself and Tucson. Occasionally brief smiles tugged the set of his lips as he thought back to how Vic Stanislau had looked dyked out in Penny's frills and flounces with the hands and feet lashed back of him and with the strings of that big poke bonnet rakishly tied beneath his chin.

But mostly Haynes' look was sober. He felt a grave concern for Penny over the part she'd determinedly played in his getaway from the courthouse. A considerable risk she'd taken playing accomplice to his jailbreak, and it worried him to consider the retaliation Curly Bill might visit upon her. The man was an outlaw, unscrupulous, ruthless in his hatreds and only but for the fact that right now Curly Bill would be busy, Haynes would never have left the region. But Graham was busy and would be busy till he got his claws on Jake's mine. And for Haynes to have stayed in the mountains would have been considered by Penny Anders little thanks for what she had done.

But Haynes wasn't running away—not by a jugful.

Let them think so if they would; it was best that they should think so. But a thought had clicked over in the back of Haynes' head while talking with Victor Stanislau. The knowledge had abruptly come to him that this was Thursday—that tonight the great fandango Penny had told him of was to come off at Tucson's Hotel Cosmopolitan; the grand concert with dancing afterwards to the tunes of the Fifth Cavalry band.

The old mud walls that had been the town's protection in those days before the government had corraled the wild Apaches had nearly vanished now; breached by man, scoured and eroded by the elements, they showed as little more than occasional mounds of melted earth here and yon through Tucson's outskirts. Twilight's mile-long shadows were stretched and gone across the range, dissolved into the curdled murk of dusk when Haynes caught sight of them; and the earliest stars were hanging their lanterns on God's rafters as he swung down from the saddle and racked his buckskin among the other horses tethered to the hitchrail fronting Steinfeld's dry goods and general merchandise emporium. With hat cuffed low across his eyes he built a cigarette, and with it glowing between his lips, casually drifted with the rollicking crowd in the direction of festivities.

It was a great turnout; everyone and his cousin were there, it looked like, and the brass-blown notes of "Oh Suzanna" proclaimed the affair well under way. The glow of vari-colored paper lanterns put a merrymaking glamour in the shadows of the hotel's open gallery, mellowing the atmosphere and vaguely picking out the gathered knots of talking people. From the ball-

room's open windows came the cavalry's enthusiastic interpretation of popular tunes.

It was, Haynes thought, entirely in the cards that among this gala throng might be a number of his enemies. But this was a thing he had to chance. The hope of seeing, of talking with Lupe Boyero had brought him, and he meant to do so if he could—come hell or come high water. Despite the short few days that had passed since her uncle's death, he felt pretty sure she'd be here. Lupe, he thought, was too much the belle to stay very long in mourning.

Casually, as though he'd not a care in the world, Haynes sauntered inside. The dancing had started by now and the clutter of menfolks looking on made it something of a task to get inside the doorway, but Haynes achieved it. Stanislau's clothes were none too good a fit, but he saw among the stags about him quite a number whose toggery fit no better. And the gun he'd smuggled in made a comfortable feeling where it nestled beneath his coat in the coroner's spring holster.

Punch was being served in one of the nearby anterooms and the breathing of some of his neighbors suggested there was whiskey on the premises—not that he was wanting any. All Haynes wanted was a few seconds' talk with Lupe; and then he saw her. The band was playing a two-step and she was dancing with Sanford Tatum.

Sight of the Yankee narrowed Haynes' eyes and left his cheeks gone darkly thoughtful. But not by a fraction did it lessen his intention of talking with the girl.

She had seen him—he could tell by her startled stare across the Yankee's shoulder; saw how the dark eyes widened, saw the paling of her cheeks. Then Tatum's head was veering around, his glance finding Haynes immediately.

WHEN the music stopped and the gentlemen were escorting their ladies on a hunt for seats, Haynes aimed to intercept the two, aimed to force his talk whether it was agreeable to Tatum or not; but in the confusion he lost them.

While he was conning the crowd for a sight of them a voice at his elbow said: "Don't turn araund, guv'nor; but if ye'd give a tuppence fer yer life, go strite-awy to the veranda."

A faint start jerked Haynes shoulders. He knew that voice with its cockney accent as well as he knew his own. It was the voice of the touring Britisher, T. J. Flasker—alias Al Loving, an operative of the Cattleman's Association.

He gave Loving-Flasker a second or two to be on his way, then headed for the gallery.

He found the man off to himself by the rail in a distant corner. The light from the paper lanterns was so poor, Haynes never would have spotted him had not the detective softly commenced to whistle "The Wee Miller of Fife" which Haynes knew from past association to be his favorite tune.

"What's up?" he asked, casually stopping by the rail near by."

"'Ell's Creeks, if yer arskin' me," the Britisher muttered. "Lumme! Ain't yer got no sense at all? Showin' yer fice araund 'ere is like ter be one quick way o' gettin' yer neck stretched. Blimey! I thort yer'd be over the Border by now!"

Haynes said grimly: "They'll not be arrestin' me again—"

"Yer said somethin' that time! They'll make a bloody sieve out of yer first time they get their sights lined! That Curly Bill ain't no kind of bloke ter play tag with."

Haynes could feel Loving's eyes upon him curiously. But he was indifferent to the range dick's wonder. He said: "I owe you a vote of thanks for your little act the other night when Smith was bent on visiting—"

"Yer'll owe the undertaker the price of a corfink if yer don't git out of 'ere! Smith an' Curly Bill ain't no farther awy than yer could throw a 'orse this minute! Are yer plumb decided yer want ter die?"

"Look," Haynes said. "I've got to see that girl that's dancin' with San Tatum. It's damn pressin'—she's got information that I need—"

"Wot the 'ell will yer do wi' it after Gabriel blows 'is 'orn?"

"Listen, Sunshine—I'm dead serious," Haynes said; and told the Association man all about Jake's letters, about the things that had led up to the inquest that had gotten him lodged in the courthouse—about that and the jailbreak, also. "Every guy in sixty miles, looks like, is after that golrammed mine," he muttered.

Loving nodded soberly. "An' if it comes ter that," he said, "they'll get it. Leastwise you won't—yer'll never get a 'and on it. Corse why? Let me give yer some news yer damn well 'aven't 'eard abaht.

There's a bloke named Weaver—Capting Weaver—wot 'as found yer blinkin' mine a'ready—as God's my witness!" he growled softly. "I 'eard it yesterday, up at Morman Flat. Found yer mine, 'e did, an' 'as got 'is light blown out fer 'is trouble. Sure! Kilt! Deader than a mackeral! They sye the Injuns did it—but if yer arskin' me, 'twas that grinnin' Curly Bill an' 'is devils!"

Haynes made a stiff, still shape in the shadows. Time dragged by. At last he spoke. "I'm obliged for the information, Al, but I've got to talk to Lupe anyhow—"

The little Cockney snorted. "Don't be a mug! You tork like a fool, boy! If yer bound an' determined ter 'ave a go at that mine, the very least yer can do is cut a big swath fer the Border like yer leavin' these parts jest as quick as yer bronc'll tike yer. Then come back if yer got ter; but don't stick araund 'ere now. An' don't open yer bloomin' mouth at that skirt—she's got a friend as don't like competition—a real brass-collar butcher-bird: a Mex bandido that calls 'isself Jarales an' is someplice in this neighbor'ood."

BUT Haynes was not to be swayed from his purpose. He appreciated the feeling back of Al Loving's warning; Albert had a heart of gold. But Haynes had little use for golden hearts at the moment. What he wanted was a talk with Lupe Boyero—and meant to have it; Tatum, Smith, Bill Graham and Jarales notwithstanding.

The slant of his jaw proclaimed it; and with a grunt Al Loving shrugged. "Orl right—go yer wye, pal; but don't sye I didn't warn yer w'en they're rowni' yer over the Jordan."

He was about to turn away when he swung back, appearing to think of something. He said, grimly serious: "Yer've been wonderin' 'oo took yer letter. . . Tike it from me, it wasn't nobody but that Boyero hussy!" And he strode off before Haynes could answer.

Al was wrong. Haynes felt sure he was. But whether he was or not could make no difference to Haynes' intentions. He would talk with Lupe, anyhow, because only Lupe could know where that whiskey-swilling cousin of her, Rodriguez, had gone—and possibly even she had no idea. But if anyone knew, it would be Lupe, and Haynes intended to find out.

He headed straight for the ballroom. A quadrille was in progress, and after some squinting around, Haynes discovered both the girl and San Tatum in one of the sets. He found the Yankee's glance upon him briefly in a way that left him wondering. There had been a signal in the postmaster's look; there had—there could be no doubting it. And when the set was over there came Tatum heading for him determinedly and with Lupe hurrying in his wake.

Without preliminary San Tatum muttered: "Lord God Almighty! What are you doing here, Haynes? Do you want to be thrown back in jail again? Of all the places to be showing yourself—"

"Let's skip all that," Haynes said. "I'd like to speak with Miss Boyero—privately."

The Yankee's granite cheeks showed no surprise, but his buzzard's stare went a little narrow as, near-sightedly, he probed Haynes' face through his glasses. Before he had a chance to make reply, however, another man came pushing up. Sam Smith, with the tattered scarf pulled tight around his neck in hard-case fashion and with his long lips parted widely in a grin.

"Boy, howdy!" he cried, seizing Haywire's fist and shaking it like a pump handle. "Congratulations on the getaway—you sure pulled 'er slicker'n slobbers! Where can we talk? I got a proposition for you—"

"You got a hell of a nerve," Haynes said, looking Smith over coldly. "The last I heard of you, you was yowling at Bill Graham to stop me!"

Smith chuckled heartily. "Yeah," he said, "I was pretty mad then, wasn't I? But we all make mistakes, boy—no use holdin' hard feelin's." He was addressing his talk at Haynes just as though San Tatum and the girl—like Sheridan—were still over eighty miles away. "C'mon; let's go out back an' get a drink an' I'll spread my cards on the table."

"You can spread them here or not at all," Haynes said. "This is Miss Boyero and the gentleman's name's Sanford Tatum."

Smith raked a glance across them. "Pleased to meetcha." And then, to Haynes: "Can't talk here—too many ears a-flappin'. What I got to say is private, an' believe me, you better hear it."

"If you've anything to say you'll have to say it here."

"It's about that mine," Smith said; and Haynes saw Lupe stiffen.

Haynes said: "What about it?"

A darker color edged Smith's cheeks. He flashed a hostile look at Tatum. "You wantin' me to tell it front of him?"

"It doesn't matter to me whether you tell it or not—"

"O. K., hombre. You know something about the mine; I know something. Jake left it to you, but you need a partner—me. I suggest we pool our interests, split any takings fifty-fifty—"

"And what makes you think," Haynes murmured, "I'd be finding it any way profitable to split my luck with you?"

Smith grinned. "There's a little matter of a map," he said. "What's more, unless you make up your mind to share an' share alike with me, you'll never bank an ounce of that ore—fact is," he drawled, grin widening, "you'll never lamp the hole."

"Is that what you told Weaver?"

Smith took a quick step backward and the grin fell off his mouth. A sulky brilliance lit his eyes and his face went dark, went dangerous. "Is that your answer, bucko?"

"My answer to you is in my gun—the same answer I've got for Bill Graham." Haynes' talk struck the silence recklessly, clear and sharp as a bell. "Never cross my track again—is that clear? Never cross my track again."

CHAPTER XX

"WELL, you certainly told that fellow where to head in at," Tatum murmured drily as Smith, darkly scowling, shoved his way through the crush at the door. "You'd better keep your eyes skinned, Haynes, if you expect to live the night out."

Haynes grinned sheepishly. "Kind of lost my temper, didn't I?" He shrugged Smith's danger away. He thought of something then and said: "How's Chortham making out?"

A faint frown tugged at Tatum's mouth but he kept his glance expressionless. "I guess he'll make out to pull through, like enough. But that's a bad habit you got, going off half cocked. Chortham wasn't shooting at you—"

"I didn't think he was. I wasn't shootin' at him, either—we're jest naturally the world's worst shots," Haynes drawled, watching Tatum narrowly. "If you got any more playful centipedes on your string you better hide 'em out, because next time I mightn't shoot so good an' you'd be havin' a coffin to pay for."

He saw Lupe Boyero eyeing her escort curiously; saw how Tatum's cheeks were locked in a flushed and angry confusion. But no remark passed the Yankee's lips and Haynes said quietly to the girl: "Can I have a couple words with you in private?"

She brought her glance from the postmaster's face in an odd, half-startled way; she said, "Can't you talk to me here?"

"I can," Haynes said, "but I'd rather not."

Tatum said stiffly: "Go ahead and talk with him if you want to, Lupe. I'll go and fetch you some punch," and, with a curt nod in Haynes' direction, wheeled away.

"You shouldn't have spoken to heem that way," she said reprovingly to Haynes. "W'en you were in the jail, he deed everytheeng he could to get you released. He 'as been tireless in his efforts to help—"

"Yeah—I know. He's got a heart of gold," Haynes said sarcastically. "But look—What I want to see you about is, do you know where Rodriguez has gone?"

A shadow crossed her eyes and she kind of shivered.

"I understand," Haynes said, "he was a damn good friend of Jake's, an' if that's so, it's important I get hold of him in a hurry."

But she shook her head. "He never tells me where he goes—after all, we are only cousins. I do not see heem often. I—I have not seen heem since—since that night." She changed the subject. "What mus' you theenk of me, Senor? I 'ave been mos' remiss, not coming to see you w'en they hold you in that awful jail. But—but I could not—"

"That's all right. Fella couldn't hardly expect a girl like you—"

"But it was not that, Senor! I—I—I thought you were the spy for Curly Beel. You mus' believe me. Rodriguez deescovered the plot that Curly Beel feex up for one of hees men to come to us an'—how you say?—eempersonate you. W'en you say your name ees Haynes, we theenk right off you are thees man—you see? Forgeef me—"

Her lashes fluttered and Haynes felt again that wild elation which had stirred him that day of his arrival when first he had beheld her at the Antler House struggling with Vic Stanislau.

She had that power to stir him, to awake

forgotten cravings. Under the drive of her personality, the need for learning of Rodriguez' whereabouts, seemed suddenly unimportant, a thing to be attended later; and he was leaning forward, leaning toward her when San Tatum with his Yankee cheeks gone dark came striding up with the punch he'd gone to fetch her.

He put one glass in Lupe's hand, and with the other extended, said drily: "Perhaps Mister Haynes might care for some—he looks as though he's needing something."

Haynes shoulders stiffened. What he might have said was suddenly forgotten in the covert look he saw the girl flash Tatum. That look stopped him; hard it was with command—with signal, recalling to his mind what Penny Anders had said of her.

His highboned cheeks blanked all expression from his face and he said quietly, "Why, yes; I guess my whistle does need a little oilin'," and he took the glass from Tatum; drank it, returned it empty to the postmaster's hand.

He smiled at the two of them grimly.

But before any further words could be spoken, a commotion at the door turned all three of them toward it. There were two men coming down the lane that had opened for them and Haynes did not need the girl's startled "Frank Esparza!" or Tatum's "The Tucson marshal!" to place the man in the lead. But it was the second man, the fellow following the peace officer, that riveted Haynes' regard.

Curly Bill. Curly Bill Graham with the wide lips backed from his teeth in an oily smile.

CHAPTER XXI

THIS was Frank Esparza, this fellow with the worried face who was nodding absentmindedly at Tatum. His frowning eyes went over Lupe Boyero and then a calloused hand came up and dragged the hat from his head when he realized she was of their company. He had the reputation of being an honest and industrious man, and if he was no scourge of the border or notorious as Tombstone's Earp, he was nonetheless a thoroughgoing lawman whose reluctance to resort to gunplay had elevated him considerably in the opinion of Tucson's better element. Ballot day was not far off and he was running for reelection and this, Haynes thought, might in part account for the gravity of his mien. Be that as it may, one thing Haynes knew: Esparza's coming was a plain prelude to trouble.

With muscles crawling and nerves grim-cocked, Haynes stood his ground and waited.

"Is this the man?" Esparza said.

Graham nodded with an evident enjoyment. "Yes-sir, that's the fellow. You want to watch out for him; he's a slick one an' a damn bad actor."

The marshal said: "Is your name Haynes?"

Haynes nodded.

"I'm afraid I got to place you under arrest, Haynes—"

"What for?"

"For that murder you pulled in Greaterville!" Graham chucked the words at him loudly. And to the marshal: "I didn't tell you, but he killed a couple of Galva's deputies gettin' out of jail; an' not content with that, he went over to the Antler House an' assaulted Vic Stanislau—them's Stanislau's clothes he's wearin' right now!"

This was a scene Haynes knew too well. It was Greaterville all over. A new deal—yes; but the same stacked cards and the same man dealing them out to him. A kind of darkness closed about him, shutting out the watching faces and the somber fight lust stamping them; narrowing down this room till there was only place for Curly Bill and this unknown quantity, the marshal.

"Put the cuffs on him," Curly Bill said.

A second's wild fury ripped through Haynes, brash anger ran its flag on his cheeks.

The marshal hesitated.

"Go on, you damn' fool," Curly Bill snarled; "arrest him!"

"Do you always call in the Law when you got any hard work to do?" Haynes murmured. Temper had slipped its rein and the rage in him was towering, driving him beyond calm judgment, shaping him to their ends. He knew it and could not help it. He was trapped again by Graham just as he'd been trapped by Graham in Greaterville—trapped by a marshal's star.

But before he could say more, or Bill Graham answer, interruption ran its turmoil around the door again. A man came in, hatless, jerking with excitement. "Jarales!" he shouted hoarsely. "Jarales' at the edge of town! He's comin' in with his raiders!"

Bedlam seized the ballroom. A woman

screamed. Men swore. Half the crowd dived cursing toward the cloakroom where their guns were checked. Esparza's voice, like a trumpet blast, lashed order out of chaos. He ordered the women to the upstairs rooms, sent runners to spread the alarm, sent men pelting to his office after rifles. He caught Haynes by a shoulder, sent him spinning to a window; sent Bill Graham to another; emptied his sixgun at the lamps and left the place in darkness. Through this obscurity his voice came issuing instructions. Every man must hold his place . "Don't fire till I give the order."

In the sudden silence, his boots cut hollow sounds from the floor. He was sending men to the gallery, to the bank, to Steinfeld's—to guard each important building. "No tellin' where the man will strike, but if his crowd comes your way, let 'em get up close—then blast 'em out of their saddles."

The even run of his talk had a calm and sobering influence. He was a good man in a crisis; he knew how to keep his head.

HAYNES heard in the distance a chorus of shouts, the taunting yells of the raiders; the quick, sharp spatter of gunfire. He cursed himself for promising Esparza to stay till the thing was over. This was his chance! This hemming darkness would cover him, would get him clear—at least would afford him a chance. He was a fool, he told himself, to stay; a damned fool to stay and fight for a man who was going to arrest him—but even as he said it he know that he would stay. . A promise with Haynes was sacred. He had passed his word to the marshal.

And then the night outside was filled with the shapes of riders. Riders and bobbing Chihuahua hats; with shouts and oaths, with the pounding of hoofs and behind them the clatter of rifles.

"Now!" Esparza said. "Let 'em have it, boys!"

Gun sound in a solid wave rolled and crashed against the eardrums, fell in echoes off the building fronts, drowning the screams of horses, the groans and cursing of riders. The street was a turmoil of churning shapes; then, abruptly, it was clear and bare, deserted—empty of all save a dozen dark blots, out-sprawled and still in the dust.

"That's all, boys."

Esparza's voice, still calm as a call to prayer. Out of the murk of banked shadows it came, calling for lights and hinting in its measured timbre it was high time for Haynes to be gone. But Haynes had promised; and while he hung there, hesitant beside his window, the marshal's voice came again above the clatter of excited voices, calling him, calling for an answer.

"I'm here," Haynes muttered disgustedly.

When new lamps were brought and the lights flared up, there was speculation and a kind of grim approval in the marshal's stare as it rested briefly on Haynes. And then Curly Bill was coming up at his saddle-bound swagger, round face grinning, mockery in his jeering glance. "Damn lucky for you, bucko, you decided to play safe," and he patted his rifle significantly.

The marshal gave half a dozen men orders concerning the outlaw dead and any wounded raiders they might find. Then he faced Haynes gravely.

"I'll have to place you under arrest, I'm afraid. I—"

"Are you," Haynes said, "goin' to take this outlaw's word—"

Esparza held a hand up. "I'm going to take Mister Graham's word, yes. In the absence of the sheriff, I have no choice. He holds a warrant for your arrest and I'm bound to honor it—"

"But you've no proof I've done what he said! Why, his rep is a stink in this country—he's bad as that crowd we just drove off! For all I know, he may belong—"

"All I know," said Esparza quietly, "is that he holds a warrant for your arrest and that he's packing a Greaterville marshal's badge." He brought a pair of handcuffs from a hip pocket; paused, thoughtfully surveying Haynes. "I'll not put these on you if you'll pass your word—"

"Hell," Graham growled. "You don't need to put 'em on him anyhow. Leave him loose. If he wants to try for a getaway, that'll suit my book just fine—"

"Are you turnin' me over to him?" Haynes asked; and Curly Bill chuckled loudly.

"You're goddamn right he is. You cut your string too short this time. Get his gun, Frank."

Haynes stood stiff with muscles cocked. If Esparza turned him over to Graham to take back, he might as well cash his chips right now, because he'd never get to Great-

erville; the look in Graham's eyes was plain.

Esparza seemed to be weighing something, turning over something in his mind. He had not taken Haynes' gun yet—probably didn't believe he had one; for Casino's pistol in Stanislau's shoulder holster made no bulge against his coat.

Haynes was scanning his chances. Bad as they were in this crowded room, they were infinitely to be preferred to any chance he might have once Curly Bill got him, without a weapon, out on that trail alone.

San Tatum came up and Esparza said: "Was this man Haynes arrested in Greaterville for the killing of a man named Boyero?"

As though with reluctance, Tatum nodded.

"Did they have him in jail? Did he break his way out—did he kill two deputies doing it?"

Haynes saw the look Graham put on Tatum; saw the Yankee hesitate. There was an invitation in Graham's eyes, a plain offer to cut the postmaster in if he talked right.

Tatum rubbed his jaw. "That's right," he said.

Esparza met Haynes' look and shrugged. He swiveled his glance at Graham. "Reckon I'll jog along with you, Bill—just to keep things legal. I'll—"

"Say!" Graham scowled, looking ugly. "What you tryin' to cut here, anyhow?"

Esparza faced Graham's baleful regard serenely. "Shucks; you just been tellin' yourself what a killer this hombre is. Can't chance him slippin' free of you—I'll just come along to make sure he stays put."

The marshal's cheeks were dogged. Half an hour later they started.

CHAPTER XXII

IT HAD turned out to be quite a party, Haynes thought, looking around disgustedly. Besides Bill Graham and the marshal, Tatum and Lupe Boyero had also elected to ride with them. Haynes had no more chance of escaping now than a snowball would have in hell.

Besides their superiority in numbers, Graham and company had guns while Haynes had nothing but his unshackled fists, for just as they'd been about to start, Graham had insisted on a search of the prisoner and had conducted it himself, abruptly backing off with Casino's pistol and waving it triumphantly at the marshal. "Take a good look, Esparza—this hogleg belonged to Deputy Sheriff Casino—one of the guys this sidewinder murdered!"

Nonetheless they'd left his hands free and he was not tied to his horse. Graham, of course, was hoping he'd try for a break so he'd have an excuse to drop him.

But Haynes had given up all thought of escape before Greaterville. When they reached town maybe something would come up to afford him some kind of halfway chance; but to try anything now would be suicide.

There was no moon. In the dim gray light of the stars, the range stretched empty, the broad unbroken miles of desert stretching away like a forgotten universe and beyond, a deeper black against the inky sky, lay the desolation of tumbled hills.

It was like his future prospects, Haynes thought grimly; darkly drear, depressing. No light or hope in all this land; not one hand but was turned against him by the legacy of Jake's mine. It was a curse on him and he had come to hate it. But he would see himself hanged before he'd trade it for his safety; he'd not give them one tenth of that satisfaction. The Lost Dutchman should never yield them an ounce of dust nor a single pin-sized nugget if he was able to prevent it.

He must have drowsed to the subdued thudding of the animals' hoofbeats, to the monotonous creak of saddle gear—to the tinkle of somebody's spur chains.

But suddenly he was awake again; whipped taut by some sixth sense that was shouting danger. Above all sound Haynes heard the pounding of his heart; and then in a twinkling, a flurry of riders was all about him and the night was filled with their fury, with the sharp crash of weapons—the scream of somebody dying. Then Haynes was falling out of his saddle; he knew it; hadn't the will to prevent it. A warm black sea was rushing up to engulf him; he could see it, could feel it all about him. He tried to struggle then; to shout. But he could not move a finger. The blackness stifled his shouts.

Returning consciousness found Haynes in a place he'd never seen before; a tiny tucked-away pocket with the dim bulk of upthrust crags all about it, a veritable buzzard's roost in its sense of isolation—a world apart; a barren rock-choked hollow scooped by time from the towering peaks.

This much he realized before his head started aching; then all coherent thought was scattered beneath the fierce battering pound of it. It were as though some giant had him in a mighty fist and in high glee was bashing him against some mountain's flank; it was that fierce.

Then afterwards, with the throb of it slackening off into one dull unremitting ache, a heavy voice tight-timbered with sardonic satisfaction was prodding at him, bludgeoning his mind into action.

Haynes pulled his glance up, shoved it around to where light's glow from a guarded fire made a red stain, disclosing the vague bulk of a crude brush shelter and the tall, vaquero-garbed figure that like some demon stood before it leering down at him.

"So you've come around, have you, finally? Guess I hit you a little harder than I meant to. Never mind—consider it a sample. You'll get a lot more, by God, if you don't sing the way I'm minded— Get 'im up on his feet, Valdez!"

A husky, big-hatted Mexican came forward, stooped and jerked Haynes upright. Haynes grimaced and a groan squeezed through his teeth at the fellow's roughness. But presently the world stopped spinning; the tall man before the fire jumped to clearer focus and Haynes saw that the lower part of his face was hid behind a tattered scarf. The firelight flashed from the silver beading of his sombrero, from the conchas and metallic thread that ornamented his vest and the leg-clutching Mexican pants.

"Jarales!"

THE tall man chuckled. "I see you know me—all the better; you have heard perhaps what I do to balky hombres, eh? Then keep a straight tongue in your head an' be quick with your answers. Where's the map of that mine Jake Miller sent you?"

Haynes only half heard him. That voice!—he had heard it somewhere! Had heard it recently—he knew it. But thinking made his head hurt worse; the memory eluded him.

"I am not a patient man," the voice purred thinly, wickedly. "That map, gringo—where is it?"

No Mexican's voice. Haynes was certain. The inflection was American; was—

"Damn you!" Jarales snarled, and cuffed Haynes hard across the face. "You talk or by God I'll take it out of your hide for the men you cost me in Tucson tonight! Where's the map?"

But Haynes, despite the pain of that blow, was grinning; grinning catlike at the baleful eyes above the raider's masking scarf. "Go ahead an' find it, Smith!"

The shape in the firelight stiffened, with an oath jerked down the scarf and proved Haynes right. The features it had hidden were those of the man who'd come into Haynes' room that night at the Haven. Jarales was Sam Smith!

"I give you fair warning," he snarled. "I'm goin' to have that map if I have to boil you in bear grease! I've gone too far to be balked by you or any other damn fool of a drifter. You're not gettin' out of this easy as Esteban Boyero did. You're up in my hideout. We ain't goin' to be interrupted—you might's well come across now as later—"

"Save your breath. I ain't talkin'."

"We'll see about that!" Smith said savagely. "Valdez! Strip off his clothes an' stake him out on that anthill." He thrust his jaw within an inch of Haynes'. "I mean business, fella. You better talk while you're able—"

"It's no use, Smith. I haven't got the map; an' if I had I'd not be handin' it over to you. Turn loose your ants, you chicken-livered gopher—I don't scare worth a damn!"

"Still the hard guy, eh? Mebbe," Smith said malevolently, "you'll loosen quicker if I stake that Anders skirt out for awhile, eh? What you got to say about that?"

Haynes felt a cold fear crawling his scalp. He stared at the raider a long silent second. The man was bluffing—he must be. Penny was safe in Greaterville. . .

As though reading his thoughts: "So I'm bluffing, am I?" Smith said grimly. "Felix, go fetch the prisoners; we'll show this Missourian something."

As the man strode off Haynes noticed something. There was someone lolling on a boulder to the left, just out of reach of the fire's dim strain. A girl! Haynes' eyes glinted as a cigarette's red end came up and brightened at her lips. It was Lupe Boyero.

And then the Mexican, Felix, Smith had sent off, came shoving two figures before him; two figures with arms lashed behind their backs. The first was Rodriguez. As the firelight illumined the second, Haynes groaned.

Smith had not been lying.

Haynes was staring at Penny Anders.

CHAPTER XXIII

THOUGH her cheeks were white, there was a world of defiance in the tilt of her chin; in the way that she carried her shoulders. Her eyes went over "Jarales" Sam Smith like he was something the cat had dragged in; and then she was looking at Haynes. An abrupt and surprising truth came forcibly home to him.

Here was the girl for a man to put his chips on; a girl whose value far transcended the mere outward appeal of good looks. Maybe she did have hair that flamed like a bucket of coal-oil and so many dang freckles it would take a guy a week to count them; but she had something more—something beyond the grand surface attractions of Lupe; something that made Lupe appear suddenly cheap and tawdry. Courage—that was it; courage that could scoff at odds, could scorn women's wiles and trickery. Courage and a steadfast loyalty. It was soul and character and will power that counted, and Penny had these. In her was a deep and abiding wisdom, a directness that had no use for women's wiles, for subterfuge; her life was geared to truth, to a firm unshakeable conviction in the ultimate triumph of justice and fair play. It amazed him that he had not glimpsed her true worth sooner.

She stood head and shoulders above the sensual appeal of Lupe; stood above her as a mountain in its solemn grandeur towers above the drab expanse of plain. She had a poise and cool serenity not to be daunted by circumstance. The womanliness, the desirability of her suddenly touched him, unsettling him, firing his senses powerfully. This was a woman, his kind of woman—worth twenty times the wealth of Miller's mine. The soft rich melody of her drawl was enormously stirring.

He looked at Lupe where she lolled on the rock at firelight's edge with a jeer on her painted lips as through the smoke of her cigarette she stared complacently at Penny. He saw the woman now for what she was: a scheming, scrupleless adventuress; no better than Curly Bill, than Stanislau or Tatum. Vic Stanislau had put the name to her. She was a woman without honor.

In that moment her entire part in this crazy tangle stood suddenly clear to Haynes. It was she who had gotten Jake's letter—no doubt she'd stolen it that night when he'd bent over her in the street when, garbed like a peon, she had fallen as though a victim of drygulch lead.

Another truth came to him. It was himself the man had fired at—not at Lupe. He had fired at Haynes and Lupe had seized upon the incident to bring Haynes to her; perhaps she had been hunting him even then to get her hands on Jake's letter. It was probably Tatum who had fired the shot; Tatum or his man, Tex Chortham. She'd been working with Tatum obviously; very likely leading him on, subtly playing him for a sucker as she'd played Haynes, all the time striving to get information—to get hands on Jake's letter so she could give it to this bandit, Jarales Sam Smith!

A lot of things were suddenly clear to Haynes that before had been obscured by the woman's duplicity. The pattern was shaping; the pieces of this jigsaw grimly sliding into place. Smith was the master joker; Smith—not Curly Bill Graham. Graham had been as much of a dupe as Tatum . . . Well, possibly not as much; but he had been fooled. Smith and the girl had been playing them all, using them each in turn when the need presented; working with them but not for them. Jarales Sam Smith with his hard, tough face, his bold and rollicking impudence. Smith was the real man back of things; the rest had been his tools.

Not that Graham wasn't after the mine himself; he was, and in deadly earnest. But Smith had been slicker; had tricked him and used him and now with all the important factors in his hand had discarded him. Haynes wondered where Curly Bill had gone to— Had Graham been killed?

But Smith was talking and Haynes' speculations scattered before the need for listening. Breath running gustily in his throat and tough high face ashine with sweat, the man was snarling: "I'm goin' to have this map, if I have to hamstring the bunch of you. Get this straight: I'm goin' to have that map!"

Yes. . .the map. Haynes had forgotten it for the moment. After all, and despite his cunning, Smith hadn't got the map. Who had it, then? The girl? Was Lupe even deeper than he'd guessed?

Haynes was convinced it was she who

had stolen it from him. Had she given Smith Jake's letter and kept the map for herself? Could—

Smith whirled with a curse, crossing ominously to Penny Anders. He grabbed her roughly by the shoulder. "Haynes had that map because it wasn't in Jake's letter when Lupe got it. Did Haynes hand it over to you? If he did, you better cough it up—an' you better cough quick if you don't wanta see him made an example of." There was a flame in his eyes and the grip of his hand made Penny wince. But she faced him defiantly, her look a thing of scorn and loathing. The cords of his scarlet neck stood out like ropes and for a second it seemed in his balked anger as though the man would strike her.

He didn't, though. With a snarled command at the nearest swarthy raider to put her and Rodriguez back in the hut, he came and stood red-eyed in front of Haynes. The stillness of his attention, the bright maliciousness of his stare cocked all Haynes' muscles.

A brash reflex of temper lifted the raider's arm, sent it glinting forward with the muzzle of a gun hard-jabbing at Haynes' stomach. His look said he would fire. But with his thumb gone white upon the hammer, Smith checked the impulse; got a new hold on his temper. The shine of sweat was on his cheeks and turbulence shook him. "You've got till sun-up an' by God, when that time comes, you better talk!"

HAYNES did not sleep.

Trussed hand and foot and dumped uncomfortably before the fire where every eye could see him, he lay doggedly, reviewing every angle of his plight, seeking feverishly to find out—some way for himself and Penny to cut loose of this. Sam Smith was grimly in earnest; he was deadly as a rattlesnake, and in the morning if he did not get that map he would try his Apache tricks on them; on Penny first to break down Haynes' morale.

Haynes cursed Smith wickedly, cursed bitterly as he strove to find some out from this. If only he had a knife—something sharp that he could bring against Smith's lashings. But he had nothing; Smith had emptied out his pockets when he'd been hunting for the map. And the knots that kept Haynes prisoner could not be loosened; they would not give a fraction; Smith had done too good a job.

Then Haynes remembered something. Smith had not taken away his spurs; they were still strapped fast to Haynes' scuffed boots, and if he could bring his legs up . . .

He could; but not enough. Their glinting metal lacked two inches of reaching Haynes' lashed wrists. It was a long time before he dared risk trying, and the wait proved anything but soothing to nerves stretched taut as fiddle strings. But the let-down—the reaction of defeat was nauseating.

It was a long ten minutes before he dared risk other experiments. Once caught, he would be given no chance to try again; and he could not be sure the outlaws all were asleep. Their snoring made a steady, stertorous sound; but Smith had named one man to stay awake as lookout, and who could say but what the fellow was awake—was playing cat and mouse with him, crouched to spring the moment Haynes should get himself shucked of his bonds.

There was one chance left, Haynes thought. A slim one and a risky one. If he could edge closer to the dying embers of the fire, he might . . . But Smith had lashed his wrists behind him, had roughly connected them with a length of rope drawn tight against the thongs that bound his ankles. He could not do very much edging while his limbs were trussed up that way; and to turn over would almost certainly create a deal of noise. The ground was covered with burro weed and broken bits of greasewood twigs from the brush they's built the fire of. These would pop, and might, if the guard were asleep, awaken him. And to turn over once would do no good, for they'd left him with his back to the fire and one turn would bring him facing it with his hands and feet behind him. And another thing in the line-up of odds against this last slim chance was the factor that he had no knowledge of how near he was to the fire. Two revolutions of his body might not be enough, or might be too much—might deposit him in the fire.

Haynes scanned the chance for quite awhile before desperation made him try it. And while his mind considered it, he kept his ears alert for sign that the guard was not sleeping. He could not see the fellow, which was added disadvantage. But at last Haynes' nerves would stand the strain no longer, and cautiously, tentatively, very slowly and carefully he started the revolution that would bring him facing the fire.

Inch by spine-tingling inch he levered himself to the right until his lashed wrists

were squarely and painfully under him and his knees were up and his face was upturned to the blinking stars. He was that way when a twig snapped under him—loudly. The miniature explosion seemed to Haynes to rock the universe, and suspense like a knife-thrust clutched him, held him rigid and unbreathing while the pounding of his heart obscured all other sound.

Then gradually night's sound crept back to him, the snores and exhalations of the outlaws, and no man moved, and finally with a sigh he could not stifle, Haynes completed the turn and lay still with his face two feet from the fire.

Only a dull glow came from it now and the deep-banked shadows piled about it hovered and swayed like aspen leaves in the light wind off the desert.

Haynes held his posture another five minutes then edged his body back a bit to make sure the next turn did not land him in the embers. Then he started it.

No twigs snapped this time but the wind felt cold to the sweat of his face and his muscles and nerves were jumpy with the expectation of lead's cruel impact, sure to follow the guard's awakening.

But the man snored on; Haynes could see him now where he sat with his back to a juniper with head dropped forward, chin on chest.

The second turn was completed and Haynes could feel fire's heat upon his hands; and the smell of his boot's scorching leather put its acrid taint in the night. Haynes edged his cramped limbs closer, abruptly stopped with insucked breath as one hand struck a live coal painfully. But burns were a part of the price to pay, and with the cords of his neck standing out like ropes, he locked his jaws and thrust his bound wrists fireward.

Burning hide and searing flesh raised a pungent stench and suddenly the pressure Haynes was exerting snapped a half-burned thong and his wrists were free, and with teeth still clenched he came to his knees and feverishly, a-sweat with impatience, he fumbled with the thong that lashed his ankles, cast it free and crouched there listening, face taut, eyes stabbing the shadows.

He was free—free! But he was not finished; the most risky task still lay ahead. He would not leave without Penny and Rodriguez. And they were in the brush wickiup with two snoring outlaws barring the opening with their bodies. Side by side they lay, with hands gripped fast to six-shooters.

Haynes flashed a glance at the slumbering lookout Smith had posted.

The man was asleep, but he was not sleeping soundly now. Haynes could not chance the man's abrupt awakening; dared not leave him to sound an alarm should he wake and find Haynes gone from the fire.

Catfooted, Haynes crossed the interval between them, crouched, eased the rifle from the man's unresisting hands. Carefully he laid the heavy weapon down; with a painful stealth and with nerves shrieking he lifted the six-gun from the man's open holster. Swiftly then, Haynes brought the pistol's barrel against the slumberer's head; caught the forward-sagging figure and gently lowered it to the ground.

He straightened then with an intent glance raking the gloom about him. The night was still save for wind's song in the greasewood, the clacking of mesquite limbs. No other movement stirred the shadows. A solid shape against the murk, Haynes crept with body bent toward the sleeping men sprawled before the brush hut's door. The pistol in his hand rose twice and fireglow glinted along the barrel's downward swooping. He scooped the six-guns from their holsters and vanished inside the hut.

CHAPTER XXIV

STEPPING like bristling cats across the slumbering forms of Smith's raiders, Penny Anders and the Mexican followed Haynes from the hut. Three times Haynes stooped, and the barrel of his stolen pistol swung its glinting downward arc; and each time he rose he had a straw sombrero. One of these he handed the girl, one he gave to Rodriguez and the third he donned himself. Rodriguez, stooping, got himself a six-gun; and then, like phantoms in the murk, they made for the hobbled horses.

Haynes knew one regret: Sam Smith was not among the men he'd clubbed with his pistol. The bandit chief had not slept in close proximity to the fire. Haynes could not discover his hideout without wasting precious time and this was his regret, for any moment Smith might wake and discover him gone from the fire.

He knew where the horses were; could tell by their restive stamping. Rodriguez was muttering sulkily under his breath when

they came up to them; he had wanted to search out his cousin, but Haynes had curtly voted the idea down, guessing what deviltry the man had in mind. The Mexican had the playful propensities of a sidewinder and Haynes watched him like a hawk.

They reached the horses in silence and Haynes breathed a prayer of thanks when he discovered they were under saddle; the raiders had been too lazy to strip the gear off. It was a matter of merest moments to get the hobbles off. Then Penny was in the saddle and Haynes was reaching for his own horn with one foot in the stirrup when Rodriguez loosed an oath and a girl's sharp cry ripped the stealthy silence like a knife.

Rodriguez' shape was a dim-seen bulk against night's darkness, but Haynes could see the downward swooping of his hand as Lupe yelled. Where she had come from or was at the moment Haynes could not tell; but she'd discovered them, was shouting wildly, stirring up the camp, and by the crashing of the brush, Rodriguez was after her.

With a bitter curse Haynes left the saddle, throwing his reins at Penny. "Hold a horse for that damn fool and see can you scatter the rest of 'em!" Then he was plunging after Rodriguez in the direction of the camp.

Lupe richly merited anything her cousin might do to her; but Haynes had need of Rodriguez—would not leave without him, for somewhere, locked in the mazes of the Mexican's shifty mind, was the secret of Jake Miller's mine, and if he could, Haynes aimed to get it.

He could hear the fellow's panting above the floundering crash of brush; and over and above it Lupe's screams were like a tocsin. The camp was roused. Haynes could hear the excited cursing and then, above it, over everything, came Smith's bull-throated roar.

They were nearly to the fire when Rodriguez' back showed black before Haynes. Without mercy, without warning, Haynes snatched the gun from his waistband and smashed the Mexican between the shoulders.

Rodriguez staggered, limped a few steps farther and turned with a snarl pulling back his lips. There was a gun in the Mexican's fist but Haynes didn't grab for it; he brought the pistol in his own hand forward in one downlashing savage swipe that took Boyero just above the ear and folded him into the brush like an empty sack.

All about them swirled the fury of the raiders, with Smith's hog-calling bellow plowing roughshod through all other sounds. But they hadn't located the quarry yet; and with a gusty breath, Haynes stooped and jerked the Mexican upright, threw him bodily across one shoulder and, lurching beneath that inert weight, went stumbling toward the horses.

By now Lupe must have gotten her story across, for all at once the discord back of Haynes sloughed off and an ominous harsh-sounding crackling of the brush betrayed concerted movement and the story of that progress was a picture in Haynes' mind. He did not need Smith's growled: "They're aimin' for the horses!" to tell him what was happening. Smith's bandit raiders were striving to cut him off. And then—it seemed right back of him—Sam Smith's bull-throat shout said: "Put him down, Haynes. Put him down right now—by God, you've had your fun! Drop him or I'll fire!"

But Haynes had no intention of dropping Rodriguez after all the trouble the man had caused him. Stanislau had claimed it was Rodriguez who had Jake's map; and if the Mexican had it, Haynes aimed to take no further chances of it falling into Sam Smith's hands. Evidently Smith had sighted them, but if he aimed to shoot, seemed like he'd have done his shooting first and left all talk till after.

HE would shoot, though, before he'd see them get away; that much was patent. In this thick dark smear of shadows, however, a man could do a deal of lead-throwing without effecting damage; anyway, it was a risk Haynes had counted and naught but death could stop him now. He started trotting.

"Damn you!" shouted Smith, and opened up; the whiners from his six-gun cutting twigs from the brush about Haynes. One slug plowed its burning length through a fleshy part of the upraised arm that was holding Rodriguez across his shoulder, ripping the wild fury of this moment through him, savaging his cheeks and turning him half about, to throw two quick shots from his pistol toward the sound of Sam Smith's cursing.

That sound signed off, but a renewed crashing of the brush lashed out its dogged story and Haynes broke into a stumbling run with his lips peeled back from hard-

locked teeth in the look of a cornered wolf. And he was like that—dangerous, desperate, all scruples put aside.

Like a wolf at bay he turned, and, eyes glinting anger, crouched beneath the Mexican's weight, he waited, gun lifted, for the first of the pack to show.

A Chihuahua hat broke suddenly from the brush at Haynes' far left and the pistol in his hand cracked once; and once again it sent flat challenge across the night and a man's scream died gurgling in his throat.

Brush sound ceased in brittle quiet and horse sound rolled across it from the distant right. Haynes sent one narrowed, raking glance across the curdled shadows and could not think what horse that was, for Penny with their waiting broncs was someplace back of him—she had to be!

The horse sound stopped. Haynes spoke into that thick, crouched stillness. "Smith," he called, "pull off your dogs and stop right there."

"Like hell!" Smith said, and sent a wild shot whamming through the trees. All across that slope his men took up the challenge and the brush was lanced with the crisscrossed streaks of muzzle light and Haynes fired till his gun was empty. With a tightened grip on Rodriguez' belt, he whirled, went floundering off toward where he'd left Penny holding the horses.

She was there. She had just three horses; the rest were gone. Haynes threw Rodriguez' limp form across a saddle, swiftly whirled a rope's end round him to hold him there, and was swinging aboard his own bronc when a hand fanned out a gun's whole cargo; and on the heels of that harsh tattoo came a chorus of shouts and cursing and one man's lifting wail choked off with the wind falling out of him.

Haynes waited for no more.

Ahead of them, abruptly a rider loomed through the starlit darkness; a motionless figure that sat its horse square in the trail and would not budge. Haynes was jerking up his rifle when the man's hand rose, palm outward, and they pulled their horses up.

"'Arf a mo', there, guv'nor!"

It was Al Loving, and though they could not see it, there was a broad grin on his face.

Haynes said: "This ain't no place for pickin' posies—swing your bronc around an' ride!"

"Lumme! Wot's the 'urry?"

"You know damn well. Was that you doin' all that shootin'?"

Albert Loving, alias T. J. Flasker, chuckled. "They pulled in their blinkin' 'orns now, didn't they? I bet that Smith could chew 'imself!"

"Yeah; an' he'll be chewin' us if we don't get out of here. He'll be after us quick's he can round up them broncs. How'd you find us?"

"Been follerin' yer orl night. I was jest workin' up ter a rescue ack when Smith's crowd pulled that ambush. Tatum's dead as a doornail an' that blarsted, bloody Curly Bill Graham's gone peltin' fer Iron Spring w'ere 'is gang's 'oled up. Where's yer aiming fer?"

"Mormon Flat. I got that so-an'-so Rodriguez an'—"

Rodriguez launched a groan, groaned again and started cursing. Haynes pulled the ropes off him and the Mexican swung stiffly upright in his saddle and the glare from his mismatched eyes made a definite shining.

But Haynes wasn't bothered. "Where's that map at?"

Boyero peeled back his lips in a snarl. "That map belongs to me an' I aim to have it—"

"Eh-heh!" jeered Rodriguez rolling his shifty eyes. "Guess not—"

"Yeah? Well guess again, then," Haynes said grimly, reaching for his gun. "Where is it?"

"Gone—me eatum," Rodriguez said, and laughed like a crazy fool.

Haynes grabbed him by the collar, shook him. "Oh, you ate it, did you? You know where the mine's at, though, an' you're takin' us there—Get started!"

"O-oh!" muttered the Mexican, scowling; and started pawing through his clothing.

"Never mind that pistol," Haynes chopped out at him. "You lost it—an' don't fiddle round with that rifle if you want to keep on breathing. We're goin' up to Jake Miller's mine an' you're—"

"No!"

"Yes!" Haynes said; and the Mexican's eyes slid away from him. "Right now! An' don't try any didos if you want to die in bed!"

CHAPTER XXV

AS THEY pushed through the night's deep blackness, striking northward, curving gently west, Haynes' mind was busy. False dawn was not two hours away and before that time Smith's gang would have found their horses and be grimly dogging the trail. And they'd not be slow as some might think, for Haynes had no doubt that among Smith's raiders would be one or more breeds who could track wild bees in a blizzard.

Yes, they still had Smith to reckon with. Probably Graham would be along, too. But Smith would come up with them anyway and there was going to be a fight.

Haynes wished Penny were not with them.

Rodriguez was up ahead there, leading. But the smile he'd given Haynes before they'd started was far from reassuring. Haynes knew in a general way which direction the trail must lead them; and so did Smith. Smith might know a shorter way than the one they followed; might somehow cut ahead of them and lay a trap to drop them. He could place no dependence, no trust, in the surly Rodriguez, and if the man's warped mind was set on some kind of trick....

This was an added risk in a game of risks and Haynes had no way of avoiding it. He kept a grim eye fixed on the Mexican's back while his other eye looked for traps.

Loving, too, was uneasy; Haynes could tell by his manner; by the restive way Loving's hands fiddled with his rifle and the quick, sharp stares the detective threw at Rodriguez from time to time.

They were in the Mexican's hands and there was no sure way around it. Their only insurance was vigilance and Haynes watched the man like a hawk.

He wondered, as he had before, what Jake had seen in the fellow. Old Jake had been a little cracked himself; it might have been this the two had in common. But for himself, Haynes would rather have pardnered a rattlesnake than this rattleweed-smoking Mex.

After some while the sun got up and Haynes stopped them to breathe the horses and to give Penny a little rest. She was a dead-game sport, a girl in a million, he thought admiringly; rough and ready she was, just the kind for a man like him. She looked over at him then and a faint flush stood on his cheekbones; it deepened when she grinned.

He walked over. "Tired?"

"Not much. You?"

"I'm used to this." He liked the tousled way the wind had blown that red hair across her cheeks; and he liked the cheeks and the quick sure way of her smile. He liked the level directness of her eyes, too; the rugged honesty in them.

"Do y'u reckon we'll find that mine?" she asked.

"Quien sabe?" Haynes shrugged. Discovery of and possession of Old Jake's Lost Dutchman Mine didn't appear as important to him now as it had seemed when they'd had him chained up in the courthouse. Of course he wanted it, if only to spite Sam Smith and Curly Bill Graham. But another want that had been fiddle-footing through his head for the last few hours had pushed Jake's mine to second place.

He said elaborately: "There's things in this world that's a heap more important than holes in the ground. If—"

And just then Loving stepped up to say with some urgency: "There's a dust back there—'way back—D'ye see it by that red knob?"

Haynes looked, scowled and with a grunt ordered everybody into their saddles. "That's Smith, like enough, an' he's makin' good time. He's under twenty miles off. We've got to shake it up a little."

THEY took it up all afternoon, but the dust hung on like a leech. Twice Loving showed his Association badge at isolated ranches and got them all fresh mounts. But when night's down-shutting darkness caught them, the dust still showed on the backtrail.

"Don't reckon we better camp," Haynes said as they paused to breathe the horses. He looked anxiously at Penny. But she smiled back at him and didn't let him see how the trip had worn her. But Rodriguez growled sulkily they had gone far enough in the dark.

"You want Sam Smith to catch you?" Haynes demanded.

Rodriguez' good eye rolled after the manner of Old Jake's. "No ketchum," he said, and leered like a Plute buck with a cargo of firewater fresh-stored aboard. He produced a knife from someplace—a broad and glinting Bowie, and tested an edge

with his thumb. "I killum!" he said and laughed wildly. Head on one side, then he growled suggestively: "Mebbe I kill you, too, eh?"

"Put up that knife before I bat your ears down!" Haynes said toughly; and Rodriguez reared back angrily. He looked mean enough to scare a horse, but when Haynes put a hand to his sixgun, a lot of the meanness vanished. "Just climb back into that saddle," Haynes growled, "an' find the way to Jake's mine."

"No savvy trail in dark—"

"You don't have to find it in the dark—we ain't that close. There'll be plenty light by the time we get there. Get goin'."

saddle," Haynes growled, "an' find the

With a look in his eye like a rattler, Rodriguez picked up his reins.

"Sure looks," Al Loving remarked, dropping back to Haynes' side for a while, "like yon hombre's fixing to tike us through them mountinks up around Pinal."

Haynes nodded. He inclined toward that notion himself.

Penny said: "It's the right way, ain't it?"

Loving shrugged, then scowled. They rode for a while in silence, the new moon throwing their elongated shadows dancing weirdly across the cliff that rose on their left.

"Yer know wot?" exclaimed the range dick suddenly. "See that black rim awye up yonder—right up ag'in' them stars? Yer know wot that is? Superstition Mountink! This bloody blighter's goin' ter tike us inter Pine Canyon!"

Haynes considered, shrugged. "I been too long away from here. You're probably right, though—anything wrong with it?"

"There's a old arrastra up at the head o' Pine Canyon—everybody araund knows that; it was built by ore thieves 'ighgradin' the Silver King—ain't got nothink ter do with Ol' Jake's lode."

"You think Rodriguez's pullin' some kind of stall?"

"Don't arsk me!" said Loving darkly. "Orl I know is Picket Post's orf thatawye," and he stretched a pointing arm to wave at the blue-black distance, "an' orf up there is Pinal. This Capting Weaver I was tellink yer abaht was stationed at Picket Post. They sye 'e's hexplored orl through 'ere; that the Injuns cort 'im once an' not findin' no other torture that would move 'im, they went out an' brung in some nuggets an' 'e went clean orf 'is nut. Then these 'ere Apaches tikes 'im out to w'ere the mine is. But durin' the night while they was 'oldin' their big powwow an' drummin' up the devil, 'e got loose an' 'ooked it like yer done larst night from Smith."

Loving appeared to think a moment. "They got 'im, though—Curly Bill an' Smith, I mean. But there was one thing they overlooked; I come acrost it w'en I was going through Weaver's things." He chuckled and grimly patted his shirt pocket. "Got hit right 'ere with me—so Mister Bloomink Rodriguez 'ad better not ply no pranks!"

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" Haynes grumbled. "Quit swingin' circles. If you got somethin' worth sayin', say it."

Loving winked at Penny; drew a crumpled paper from his pocket, smoothed it out upon a knee. "Too dark—carn't read it," he grunted, pocketing it again. "No matter. This 'ere is wot I got orf Weaver—yer see, I found 'is body after them 'sassins was through. There was a special kind of slick-back button on 'is jacket wot them lobos 'adn't noticed; this 'ere map was in it. Shows the location of yer Lorst Dutchman ter be a striteawye line from the Four Peaks ter yonder needle—"

"South of the River?" Penny asked; and Loving nodded. "Just baek o' Superstition Mountink—someplice between the Four Peaks an' that needle."

Haynes said thoughtfully: "So if he starts us into Pine Canyon—"

"Yer'll know," Loving interrupted, "hit's time ter bat 'is hears dahn!"

CHAPTER XXVI

NEXT morning, early, they sighted the adobe buildings of a small-spread ranch tucked away in the hills. Their horses, despite the frequent rests Haynes had given them, were fast reaching a point where dependence could no longer be placed in their ability to ride the party out of danger in case of sudden attack. So Haynes altered the course in such a way as would take them past the outfit.

Smoke was coming from the chimneys of the largest structure when the party pulled into the yard. A whiskered-faced man with a rifle stepped out of the door with a scowl as Haynes swung out of the saddle.

"Climb right back up an' git on yer

way," said the man with the rifle gruffly. "Too many o' you varmints driftin' these hills. G'on, now—mosey!" And he flung the rifle to his shoulder.

"Hold up a bit, Old-Timer," Haynes said smiling. "We're not fixin' to bother you. All we want is to buy four horses—if you can spare that many as a favor. Could do with a little grub, too—'specially this lady. We can pay for what we're askin', an' glad to do it." He knew Loving had money on him. He said generously: "We'll pay cash an' give you these horses for obligin'."

Whisker-Face lowered his rifle and considered. You could see the avarice gnawing him. Then he turned and stared at Penny and was that way, still looking, still considering, when a rawboned slattern stuck her head out the door to grumble: "Land sakes, Dode! What's ailin' you? Ask 'em to light down—don't stan' there like a nidjuit!"

When they left, half an hour later, they were riding fresh and better horses and had a hot breakfast under their belts. Haynes suspected the horses had been stolen, but it was no business of his and Loving had offered no protest. Except that now he did some grumbling about Haynes' generosity with his expense money.

The morning was bright and crisply clear with the fog banks all rolled out of the valleys and, what was more important, no dust showed on the backtrail. Penny thought this a blessing; but Haynes' face showed no pleasure and even Loving looked a little grim.

The lack of dust might mean of course that Smith and his men had quit. But it was a lot more likely to signify, he thought, that they'd come into country that was Smith's own stamping ground, and that the raider had someway cut ahead of them to ready a rousing welcome.

Loving appeared to share this notion. He jerked a look to where Rodriguez was riding in the lead; and Haynes saw the gleam in the Mexican's eyes as they conned the country round them.

Haynes rode abreast of him. "Never mind spyin' out no box canyon to shunt us off in. You stick to the trail an' we'll get along like a couple of sixguns in the same belt. But you go tryin' any didos an' you'll wind up strummin' a harp—that clear?"

His eyes were blue and bright with warning and Rodriguez nodded meekly, but his scowl was not reassuring. He hauled the carbine from beneath his leg and proffered it. "No savvy about this rifle—you fixum."

Haynes with one eye peeled for trouble examined it. It was set on a hair trigger, and in that respect was much like the Mexican's temper. Haynes' own temper was none too even. The crease on his arm that he'd got while lugging Rodriguez out of Smith's camp was beginning to make itself noticeable. Penny'd washed and bound it up for him at the first creek they had come to; but it wasn't healing properly.

"Nothin' wrong with this rifle except it's set on a hair trigger," he said. "Don't finger it till you aim to—Hey! Watch where—"

He didn't bother finishing, but hurled himself nearly out of the saddle as flame jumped from Rodriguez' rifle. The blast jarred by so close he could feel the powder sting; and next thing he knew the Mexican was off the trail, bent low across his black bronc's neck and roweling for the timber.

Haynes tore his gun from leather, but before he could drive lead after him, Rodriguez was swallowed by brush. Haynes jumped his own horse after him, but the artful Mexican, leaning on past experience, got clean away. Once Haynes caught his mocking laughter, but never a thing to shoot at, and finally, disgusted, he rode back into the trail.

"Well," Loving said sardonically, "we might as well shove 'ome."

"Shove home if you want to," Haynes ripped back at him; "but I'm goin' to find that mine!"

Loving shook his head. "From wot I 'ear, there's been blokes 'unting it ever since Jake Miller paid the Peralta brothers sixty thousand bucks for it—an' ain't but one guy found it yet. Weaver—an' he's dead as a pickled 'erring!"

"Mebbe he is," Haynes snapped. "But I ain't—as Rodriguez an' the rest of that bunch are damn soon goin' to find out!"

"Orl right," growled Loving. "I'll string along with yer—but yer ain't goin' to get that mine, boy, an' yer might's well make up yer mind ter it. Weaver wouldn't never 'a' seen it, either, if it 'adn't been fer them Injuns."

"You don't have to string along with me," Haynes grunted. "You got your own

work to do, huntin' down Curly Bill for the Association. Just hand me over that map you got an'—"

"Lumme! I can see meself! Not 'arf, my lad—not 'arf!"

ALL that day they prowled the hills and gulches, referring continually to Weaver's sketchy plan. But as a mapmaker the Captain left a lot to the imagination. He had known where the mine was and had contented himself with the knowledge, not bothering to "X" his drawing. All it showed were the Four Peaks, and almost on a line with them a finger-like knob thrusting up from a chaos of canyons. There was no writing, no names on the paper anyplace.

It was a hell of a map, Haynes thought bitterly; better than nothing, but not a great deal better. It began to look like the range dick was going to prove a true prophet.

They had gotten some biscuits and scraps of jerked beef from the rancher who'd sold them the horses, and along about five o'clock they quit hunting long enough to eat and rest for a little. Penny was tired but game. "Don't quit on my account," she told Haynes after they'd eaten. "If y'u want to hunt for that mine, y'u keep huntin'—I'll make out to keep up with y'u."

Loving eyed her approvingly, but Haynes only nodded. He was too busy with the things in his head to half hear what she was saying. "It's funny," he said, "we ain't heard from Smith; I figured him to jump us long before this. He must be around here someplace, if we're anyways near Jake's mine."

"It's a damn big country," Loving muttered eying the mile-long shadows downbent by the dying sun. "We goin' ter camp 'ere fer the night or—"

"No sense quitting till dark," Haynes growled, and swung into the saddle. "I can understand our not cuttin' sign of Rodriguez; he's slick an' ridin' solo. But it's daggone funny we ain't sighted Smith. An' Graham; I'd of thought to see him—"

"Oh! I fergot ter tell yer," Loving said apologetically, "but when Smith's crowd gunned Tatum, they was out to down the rest of 'em. Esparza lit out fer Tucson, an' Curly Bill, last I seen of 'im, was makin' fer Iron Spring with both 'ands clamped ter the 'orn. I dunno 'f 'e even made it—'e was bad bogged dahn in the middle."

Haynes glared. "An' you been lettin' me worry about that pelican all this time!"

"'Ow'd I know yer was worryin'?"

With a grunt, Haynes picked up his reins and the search for Jake's mine was resumed. Haynes felt somewhat easier in mind, knowing Graham wouldn't have to be watched for. Smith was bad enough and any minute that Damnfool Rodriguez might open up from the rimrocks.

But night closed down without any sign from either and Haynes was about to adjourn the hunt till next morning, when Loving, suddenly pointing, cried: "Blimey! Look! Wot's that?"

They were in the high hill country south of the River, and away off, someplace west of them, a pin-point of light was gleaming. Haynes' pulses jumped. "A campfire!" Penny cried; and Loving nodded, looked expectantly at Haynes.

It was getting almighty dark and was no kind of time for prowling. In this rough region a man would find stalking hazardous enough in daylight; but the fire spurred Haynes' determination.

"Whoever that is," he growled, "may be camped for the night or only paused for his supper. May not be anyone we know; but I'm layin' odds it's Rodriguez or Smith—more apt to be Smith, I reckon. But one thing's sure: 'f we wait till morning the chances are whoever it is'll be gone—or we can't find 'em."

Loving said resignedly: "Wotcher goin' ter do?"

"I'm goin' up to that fire if I can get there."

"Wot abaht the girl?"

"Never mind me," said Penny. "I'm doin' whatever Haynes does—"

"No. You better wait here," Haynes muttered. "May be risky goin' up there an' I don't want you gettin' hurt. You wait here with Al—"

"'Arf a mo," Al said. "If yer goin', I'm goin' too—see?"

"We're all goin'," Penny said determinedly.

"Now look," Haynes said. "Suppose that's Smith an' his gunnies?"

"What if it is?" Penny bridled. "He won't shoot me any deadern'n he'll be shootin' y'u!"

"But you're a girl!"

"Y'u didn't think I was a jassack, did

y'u? What's wrong with bein' a girl, I'd like to know. I got two hands, ain't I? Can hold a rifle, can't I? Then quit jawin' an' let's git started!"

"Yer said somethink," Loving applauded. "W'ile we're gassin', that jarsper may pull 'is fr'ight."

HAYNES gave in reluctantly. He didn't like the idea of Penny getting round that campfire; but the way to keep her away from it didn't occur to him. He did say, though: "We'll have to leave the broncs—"

"Well, leave 'em," Penny said. "I got two feet on me, ain't I?"

It was slow working stalking that fire. It plainly wasn't a big one and they'd no idea how far distant. They had to proceed mighty careful and in this dark it was a harrowing business. Every foothold had to be tested before they dared put any weight on it. Once a rock rolled beneath Penny's foot and brought them up stiff and breathless. But the fire wasn't doused and after a while they moved on again.

The night was still as only night in the mountain fastnesses can be and the loudest sound to each of them was the beating of their hearts. The stars didn't give much light and the moon was still back of the rimrocks. It was a mighty nerve-wracking process.

But all things, however extreme, must of necessity come to an end eventually, and at last the fire loomed before them, scarcely a stone's throw off to the right. It was in a shallow rock-studded gulch, and by its meager light they saw before the cliffside the great dark hole of a pit. The top of a thong-lashed ladder stuck up out of it, and near by a tunnel led off into the gulch's north wall. But the place loomed blank, deserted; and Haynes was just straightening up when from the clustered shadows of the rock-strewn floor a rough voice said impatiently: "By God, I'm goin' in there!" and ten feet of a man stepped out of the rocks.

Loving cursed softly under his breath and Haynes, with the hot blood pounding through his arteries, felt Penny's clutch on his arm.

The voice and the shape were Sam Smith's; and Lupe Boyero with a gun in her fist stepped into the fireglow after him. "Sure he eesn't down een that peet?"

Smith stopped, considered, then crossed to an edge of it and, lying down on his belly, cautiously thrust his head over after taking off his hat. But almost immediately he was up on his feet again, scowling. "Ain't nobody down there—or if there is, I couldn't see 'em." He sloshed the Chihuahua hat back on his head. "He's in that tunnel, damn him, an' I'm goin' in—"

"He—"

She broke off and they stood stiffly still, heads cocked to one side, listening. Two more big-hatted figures moved from the rocks and stood by them and one of these lifted a shaking hand and crossed himself as the muted sound of a laugh drifted hollowly from the tunnel.

It was Rodriguez' though; no mistaking it.

Smith, with his slit of a mouth folded ominously, trotted for the tunnel, gun lifted.

"Don't!" Lupe screamed and clutched at his arm.

With a strangled cry the girl rushed after him; and the curdled murk of that hole closed solidly back of them; and there was nothing in the fireglow but the scared-still shapes of the left-behind raiders, Valdez and Felix, who stared at each other nervously and glared about them with chattering teeth and with bodies crouched ready for flight. Just these—and the box Haynes was just now noticing.

It was over against the opposite wall, a trunk-like bulk in the shadows. The Mexicans appeared to notice it just as Haynes did, and abruptly, swearing, they sprang toward it. Gesticulating, they crouched above it holding excited consultation; and then, still jabbering, they bent and together hefted it, came lugging it toward the fire.

They set it down not six feet off—not six feet from the fire, that is—and, squatting, fumbled with its fastenings till Felix with an oath jerked out his six-shooter and broke the lock with its barrel.

Valdez with the greed stamped plain on his cheeks yanked back the lid impatiently. Then both men went still as death. Crowded above that open box they stood like they eyed a rattler.

"Madre de Dios!" cried Valedz hoarsely; and "Body of Christ!" chattered Felix, shaking. He commenced a cautious backing, walking soft on the balls of his feet.

"Maldito!" Valedz cursed him. "Would

you leave it by the fire, big fool! Help me leeft it back a leedle—"

They were that way, stooped and hefting, grunting with the labor of it when the black hole of the tunnel mouth came a scream that made the blood run cold; a woman's—shill with terror.

CHAPTER XXVII

IT WAS like a banshee's wail and brought Haynes upright into the fireglow with the gun stiff-lifted in his hand. The box and the men crouched over it lost significance in his quick, hard need to know what went on back there in the tunnel. That scream presaged disaster and it was in his mind to seek its cause when Penny, startled, urgent, caught him in a frightened grip, and Loving, forward crouched and pointing, cried huskily:

"Lumme!"

And well he might.

The box's near end, stained copper in the fireglow, stamped in three-inch markings beneath the rough rope handle, declaimed: $C_3H_3(NO_3)_3$. Above it Valdez stood transfixed and Felix, turning suddenly, saw them across his shoulder. He let go the box and dashed for the ladder top showing above the pit's near lip.

Valedz, with sweat a pale shine on his cheeks, was left with the box's whole weight. The off-balanced bulk of it staggered him, but with a mighty, groaning effort he kept Felix's abandoned end from striking ground. The effort swung him in a circle—pulled him over till he was folded low above it like some bent old gnome with a treasure chest hugged to his belly.

"What is it?" Penny whispered hoarsely; and Haynes, through gone-tight lips that didn't move, gritted: "Soup!—For God's sake, run! The fool's headed straight for the pit!"

Valdez, every energy and faculty regimented in the struggle to keep his off-balance cargo from hitting ground, seemed indeed to have lost all sense of direction. He was at the pit's very edge—

And then the ground broke under him.

A brilliant pure white flash turned the night as bright as day; then all went back in one tremendous, crashing roar.

LONG after debris had ceased to fall, Haynes lay where the blast had flung him in the brush by the outer canyon's wall. It was not so much that he couldn't get up, for he guessed he could if he would try to. But he had no will to move; shock had done that to him—shock and knowledge. Old Jake's Lost Dutchman Mine was lost and gone forever now—gone to the glory that had grabbed those in it; Smith, Rodriguez and Lupe, and the Mexicans in the pit.

Pit? There probably wasn't any pit now. More like, the whole damn gulch was a pit if he knew anything about the action of nitroglycerin. God, what fools! And to think they'd lugged that ghastly trunk straight over to the fire—had broken its lock with a pistol barrel!

After a while he clawed himself erect and in the moon's blue light was half-heartedly feeling himself over to see if he had any broken bones, when a sudden recollection drove reaction's lethargy from him, grabbed the muscles of his stomach in a cold clamped clutch.

Penny!

God—where was she? Was she dead?

Her voice, breaking through the quiet, reached him, galvanized him into action and quick seconds later he was by her, lifting her gently to her feet. "I'm not hurt—I mean, not bad hurt," she said, and then swayed toward him and they held each other tight, and were that way, in a world apart, when Loving's rude voice snarled, protesting: "Lumme! Are yer goin' ter 'old that clinch orl night? If it wouldn't be arskin' too much, would yer mind tuggin' that mountink orf me briskit an' scrapin' that forest orf me fice?"

And later, after Loving—not too hurt to go exploring—had called back to say the pit and the whole gulch wall were gone, that the tunnel was just a memory, Penny, gravely watching Hanes, said:

"I guess—I guess y'u'll be goin' back down to Sonora now....I mean, now that mine's blown into splinders an'—an'.... Well, I suppose there ain't nothin' to keep y'u here...."

"No," Haynes said, "I guess not—I mean," he said with his quick-streaked grin, "I guess I won't be goin' back there. You know, I kind of like it here an'—Shucks! Once in a lifetime a fella meets the sort of girl he's always dreamed about; makes him kind of itch to settle down, have a place of his own an'—Well, I got that itch an' you're the girl; an' what I say is—How about it?"

She didn't speak nor did she have to.

DEATH TRAILS THE CARVER STAGE

Bill Carver came back to find that his partner had sold him out and that Pearsall's crooked transports were riding over the Carver-Bleeker lines. But a silent passenger rode on the few stages Bill had left—Death!

THE stage was rolling south out of Windhill as Bill Carver came in to town. Not that there was anything remarkable in that, for it was the hour for the stage to roll. The extraordinary thing was that it was one of the new, gaudily red and white stages of the new Pearsall Transport Company, rather than one of the old, battered, familiar Carver-Bleeker stages. And only Carver stages were supposed to run over this road.

His gray eyes thoughtful, Carver pushed open the door of the stage office, and for a moment he was framed there in the doorway—a tall, lean man in faded levis and old sack coat, his gaze merely questioning as it focused on the man squatted rather like a toad behind the littered desk. But in that scrutiny there seemed to be something which made Sam Bleeker suddenly nervous.

"Why—why, hello, Bill," he greeted, and rasped his tongue across

by ARCHIE JOSCELYN

suddenly dry lips. "I—I wasn't expectin' to see you back so soon. Have a good trip?"

Carver came on in and closed the door.

"What's the meaning of a Pearsall stage going out of here, Sam?" he asked mildly.

The very mildness of his question seemed to agitate Bleeker still more.

"Pearsall? Why, I—it ain't nothing much, Bill. I—I can tell you all about it."

"Suppose you do that," Carver suggested. "I'm right anxious to hear."

"Why sure, I—you see, Bill, the facts are, we—we're losin' money, runnin these stages. Going broke."

Bill Carver offered no comment. Only Bleeker seemed to find the steady gaze of those gray eyes doubly disconcerting.

"That's the size of it, Bill. Losing money right along. We can't keep running, not that way. So, with you being away and all, I—I let Pearsall take over part of our route. He's willing to buy us out, and pay a good price—and there'll be a good job in the new company for you—"

He stopped, blinking, at the scorn in his partner's eyes. Some of it had crept into Carver's voice when he spoke.

"Don't bother to go on lying to me, Sam. I always knew you were a weak sister, afraid of your shadow, but I at least gave you credit for being square. I know, and so do you, that we're making money—mighty good money, or Drew Pearsall wouldn't be trying so hard to crowd us off the earth. And I know too, that that yellow-bellied hound of hell wouldn't pay a good price or give anyone a square deal under any consideration. It's not in his nature."

Carver paused, a little wearily, his eyes sad and disillusioned.

"The Carver stages keep running, Sam. Don't make any mistake about that. Regardless of Pearsall or the devil himself. And I'm takin' a Carver stage out of here, now, to keep the line to schedule. Don't let any more crazy ideas get in your head—and don't let any more Pearsall stages run on our route!"

He turned abruptly, was out of the door and clomping down the steps before Bleeker could come scrambling to his feet. At the door, he flung a desperate word after the tall retreating back of Carver.

"Come back here, Bill! You can't do that! I won't let you. Listen to me—"

CARVER gave no sign of having heard. Jaw clamped hard, he strode into the big livery stable and galvanized the men to action. Five minutes later, with himself on the box, a Carver stage was rolling out of town, into the scarcely settled dust of the Pearsall stage.

Bitterness crawled in Carver's mouth as he drove. It had been an uphill fight for months, to hold what they had won, against the unscrupulous methods of Drew Pearsall. But to have the truth of what he had of late come unwillingly to suspect, so forcefully brought home to him, that his own weak-kneed partner was not only a quitter but willing to double-cross him in his absence—that was pretty hard to take. But he was resolved, as he had declared, that the Carver stages were going to keep running.

In the last five years he had opened up this country, had built the Carver-Bleeker line, even the roads they ran on. Some of the roads weren't much, but they were all right for a cool-

headed driver who knew his business. Bill Carver had been the big man in this Windhill country until the coming of Pearsall. He didn't mind rivalry for leadership, but he did object to Drew Pearsall both on principle and instinct. The man was a rat, and a blight to any country.

Carver's gaze swept the road ahead. He had driven steadily, lost in thought, and had come a long way from Windhill itself. For a while the stage had been climbing steadily, twisting back and forth along winding dug-roads where more than once they seemed about to meet themselves coming back, corkscrewing to near the top of the pass. The scent of pine wafted strong here, wisps of clouds sparkled golden in the sun where the road dipped and turned.

More than a thousand feet below was the silver ribbon of the Chickasaw river, looking puny and remote. And at this point, with towering ledges above the road and a sheer dug-road on the other, it was almost a sheer drop down for that thousand feet—

The sudden blasting roar of a high-powered rifle jerked his attention away from the river. With the first shot, the off-wheeler plunged wildly in the traces, rearing, tumbling, giving a shrill neigh of pain and terror. As fast as a man could work the lever of the gun, more bullets were being pumped, the off-leader was dying as well, and, both stricken cayuses on the outer brink, they were pitching, dragging the rest of the team and the stage as well, inexolerably toward the brink.

It had all happened with devastating swiftness. Carver flung one glance toward the wooded heights above the road, whence death was thundering down, and the glimpse of a face was seared upon his memory —the white, vacuous face of Sam Bleeker, who was his partner and who had betrayed him.

He had only the single glimpse. The next moment, horses and stage alike were starting the long plunge. Carver stood up, trying to jump, but he was too late. It had all happened too fast, and in the single moment when he might have jumped, his mind had been frozen by the face he had seen, peering down from where treachery and death had hidden.

A man on horseback, cutting cross-country, following a trail impossible to the stage, would have had plenty of time to reach the spot ahead of the stage as it followed the twisting road. And Sam Bleeker had done that—

THEY were falling, plunging down in a wild tangle, yet strangely enough the stage was still going down almost as it had been on the road, upright, not turning or twisting, but being gradually pulled farther down in front by the weight of the teams still attached to it. It took only a breath of time to fall from such a height, a hushed breath wherein the side of the hill hurtled dizzyingly past at the side, the silver of the river was rising up at them at unbelievable speed. In another moment they'd strike on some of the boulders in mid-stream, and that would be the end.

Carver felt the shock as the stage struck and bounced, knew that he was being catapulted through the air, then blinding darkness, shot through with fiery red, descended upon him.

His first sensation was of an aching head and a feeling as though he had been pounded for a beefsteak. Presently, as his head cleared a little

and memory returned, Carver sat up and looked around, surprised to find himself alive. The thing seemed incredible, after such a drop as the stage had taken. Yet alive he was. There was a bump on his head, which was puffed and tender as a boil, where his head had hit and knocked him out, and as he tried to stand, he had to sink down again, gritting his teeth. His left leg wasn't broken, but the ankle was so badly sprained that it would be some time before he could walk again.

He was, he saw, back in a little hole in the rocky ledge, a sort of cavern, not more than ten feet deep, five or six feet wide and about as high. From the edge of it he looked out and down, marveling anew at his luck in being alive.

The river, looking vastly bigger than it had from up at the road, was only fifty feet below him now. Downstream a couple of hundred feet, lodged against a black boulder which reared its head among the frothing current, was what was left of the stage and horses. One dead horse, awash in the water, a wheel crazily in air, a few boards and some twisted iron. That was all.

Evidently the rest of it had broken loose and gone on down. The horses, of course, would have been killed as they hit, broken to pulp on the stones, just as the stage itself had smashed to kindling-wood. And as he would have died if he had stayed on it.

Just below him, jutting out from the cliff where it had found a precarious roothold, was a big pine tree. The top of it was freshly broken off, and he began to understand. The falling stage had struck on that, and the bending, swaying top of the tree had bounced it like a rubber ball, flinging him off and to the side. Luck had tossed him in to this cave, otherwise he would have tumbled far enough to break his neck, even then.

As it was, he was alive, and not much hurt beyond the sprained ankle. But getting on down might not be easy. There was still fifty feet to the bottom, and it looked bad.

"Anybody looking down from up above and seeing that wreckage will sure figure I'm dead, too," he reflected. "Which is maybe just as well, till I'm able to get around again."

He waited there the rest of the day, until dusk settled. Then, tormented by thirst, he tried the descent. More stiff and sore than he had realized, handicapped with a sprained ankle, it was hard going, and, having made a little more than half the distance, he lost his hold and fell, but luck was with him again as he landed in a mossy, muddy spot beside the swirling current.

For the next week, unable to travel, there was nothing to do but stay there, contriving to fish a little and gather some berries, gradually working his way down-stream by easy stages.

A week after the stage had gone off the road, he hobbled into the town of Cayuse.

PAUSING for a moment at the outskirts, he surveyed it gloomily. Cayuse had been his town. He had been the first man there, he had pretty well built the place. He had taken a lot of pride in it and in being called the daddy of the town, even if it was a wild cayuse.

But that was pretty well changed now. Drew Pearsall had made Cayuse his own headquarters, and himself the big man in town. A stage was pulling in now, on schedule, but

it was a gaudy red and white affair, not a Carver stage. The Carver offices were dark and deserted.

Which came as no surprise to Carver. Unshaven, dirty, he sidled into a little, dimly-lit restaurant, ordered a meal and ate it without being recognized, and paid for it with the lone silver dollar he had in his pockets. His lips twisted. That was what it meant to be the builder of a town!

With the meal under his belt, he walked down the street to the stage offices, pushed inside. Drew Pearsall himself was behind the desk, busy with a column of figures. A six-shooter lay on the desk, handy to his reach. For a moment he did not look up, and Carver studied him.

Pearsall had come to the country a couple of years back. He was a tall man, and he had been well-built in those first days, with a driving personality which was still apparent. But now there was a new arrogance upon him, as well as added flesh, a developing paunch. He glanced up, stared a moment, and his red-joweled face whitened a little as he recognized his caller.

"Carver!" he ejaculated.

"Figured I was dead, didn't you?" Carver nodded. "I'm not easy to kill, Pearsall."

"I did hear that your stage went off the road, and, considering where it went, and no sign of you being found for a week and more—well, people have figured you were dead," Pearsall admitted. "I'm glad to see you still alive, though."

"No need to lie, Pearsall—not that it bothers your conscience any, I know, but we understand each other. If you'd tell the truth, you're sorry that I'm not dead."

Pearsall's face paled a little again, then he shrugged.

"Have it your own way, Carver. What did you want here?"

"I came here because I see that the Carver buildings are locked up and deserted. Why?"

"That's simple. I bought out the Carver-Bleeker Stages and consolidated the lines."

"You thought you did, maybe. With me alive, it sort of upsets your plans, eh?"

"Not at all. Your former partner, Sam Bleeker, acting as agent for the old Carver-Bleeker Stages, sold me full interest in the line. It's perfectly legal and binding."

"One partner can't sell the other's interest and have it legal and binding. You know that, Pearsall. If he figured I was dead, he might try it—but since I'm alive, that upsets the deal."

"Since the deal was made while you were still alive, and of course with your consent, your subsequent supposed death has nothing to do with it whatever. If you want to settle any differences, you'd better do it with him. He's still in Windhill, where he is manager for the consolidated line."

"Reckon I'll have a little talk with him," Carver said bleakly. "Stage leave same time as usual?"

"Same time as usual—if you've got the price." Pearsall's voice was equally bleak.

CARVER stared at the man a moment. He knew what that meant. So far as money was concerned, he hadn't a thin two-bit piece, and Pearsall didn't intend for him to get back to Windhill and bother the wobbly-kneed man who had been his partner. Pearsall had started to break him, and he intended to finish the job.

More proof of that was given him

presently. Out on the street, he hesitated a moment, then stepped into the Cayuse Saloon. He didn't want a drink, but if he had any friends left in this town, he'd be most likely to find them there.

From the looks of things, he didn't have any friends left. If so, they were not in evidence. Men who had been his acquaintances, and glad to be noticed by him a week or so before, when he had been Bill Carver of the Carver company, had changed with news of his changing status. Drew Pearsall was the big man in this town now, and these sattelites clustered like moths toward the brighter light.

Proof was soon afforded him. For a little while he was an object of curiosity, since they had supposed him dead, but that was all. Then a new man entered the saloon. Swifty Lew—no one knew him by any other name—had drifted in to town a few weeks before, and, through the influence of Pearsall, had been installed as town marshal. Carver had raised no objections, for Swifty made a reasonably good marshal. But now he evidently aimed to earn his money, knowing where it came from. He sauntered up to Carver.

"You don't seem to be drinkin' tonight, Carver."

Carver shook his head.

"Just looking around," he said.

"Just loafing, way it looks to me," Swifty said, and his voice was flat. "We don't have no use for loafers—not in this town, Carver."

Carver eyed him bleakly, not much surprised.

"Meanin'?" he asked softly.

"Meaning is, you get out of town—and stay. Don't be around here, come morning."

Having delivered his warning, the marshal sauntered off. It had been given, of course, at Pearsall's orders, and Carver had chosen to ignore it. He reflected, with a touch of grim humor, that no one would have dared suggest such a thing to him, up to a week ago.

But it was real now. He was broke, without even a gun. Rats desert a sinking ship. Not but what he had plenty of friends here, men who'd give the shirt off their back. But none of them happened to be around here right now, and he didn't care to drag them into this, anyway. He could still do some fighting himself.

Carver turned, sauntered to the door and out. On the street, he was careful to step into the deeper darkness of the middle of the street. One attempt to murder him had failed, but there would likely be others.

The stage—a Pearsall stage, of course, would be pulling out of town at about dawn, heading for Windhill. He aimed to be on that stage. His first job was to settle things with Sam Bleeker, who had double-crossed and tried to kill him. After that, Pearsall could take his turn.

But they wouldn't allow him to get on the stage, here in town. It was Pearsall's idea to keep him away from Windhill and Sam Bleeker. And just as certainly, they would be looking for him to try something like that.

BUT there was more than one way of skinning a skunk, and he had time enough, with the night ahead of him—which was lucky, since he couldn't travel very fast. Half a dozen miles out of Cayuse, the stage would make a brief stop, and he'd get it there.

It was nearing midnight when he reached the half-way house, a livery stable and combination hotel, bar and

restaurant. Letting himself into the stable, he burrowed in the hay. When a stir denoted that the stage would soon be along, he slipped outside and behind a clump of trees close to the road. One passenger alighted, and his glimpse as the door was opened showed that the stage was empty then. No one got on.

As it started to roll again, he stepped out and caught on to the back. He clung there till they were around a bend, then climbed to the top and crawled forward. As the driver turned, startled, it was to gaze into a set of whitely gleaming teeth beneath a grim-smiling mustache, a pair of cold gray eyes, and his own gun, which Carver had just lifted from the holster. As he slid down on to the seat, Carver took the reins in his other hand.

"You ride a spell," he ordered. "Then I'll slow down for you to jump. Make it good."

With the gun at his ribs and that chilling smile confronting him, the driver raised no objections. A few miles farther on, he jumped as ordered, and Carver kept the stage rolling, steady on schedule. By the time the driver could get word to Pearsall of what had happened, it would be out of the question for any rider on horseback to overtake him or get warning to Sam Bleeker of his coming.

Farther on, there was a stop to change horses, but with his hat pulled low over his eyes, grunting when spoken to, he stayed on the box and the change was made with no one the wiser. Again, the stage ran empty—no passengers.

"If I was a superstitious man, I'd be gettin' nervous, right about now," Carver reflected. "When people shy away like this, it's taken for sign of trouble."

On the seat beside him was a coil of rope—a lariat with loop built in, tied loosely in place to hold it. Some cowboy had forgotten it when he alighted. Well, he'd been a cowboy himself, and still knew how to use a rope. Carver loosened it experimentally.

The stage topped a crest and, glancing back, he was able to see for miles. Vanishing on that distant horizon, like a will o' the wisp, was a distant smudge of smoke, which had gone straight up into the clear sky. And ahead, now, was another dug-road, where the road dipped and twisted down toward Windhill.

There was no such dizzying height here as at that point above the river, but it was down hill, a steep, bad grade at best. Ahead, a gnarled and twisted pine tree lifted its head above the road, where it had obtained a precarious roothold in a crack of the ledge below and had held it through the years. A broken-off branch reached out like a gaunt and spectral arm.

Carver had seen that tree and that branch many times in the past, and he noted them now as one of many details, his eyes sweeping the road and hillside above. But, watching as he was, he only saw a puff of smoke from rocks above the road, heard the blast of the rifle, a chatter of high danger.

The mischief had been done with those smoke-signals—the one thing he had failed to calculate on. Now, with both leaders shot in their traces, they were pitching, tumbling toward the brink as on that other occasion, dragging the rest of the team and the stage with them. Straight toward where that gnarled pine lifted to look up at the sun and hold its place against the gale.

Carver's hand still held the lariat.

On this sliding, down-hill road, there was no chance to stop that dreadful drag, even with the brake kicked on hard. A moment later, stage and horses bounced and rolled over the side. A crash echoed up from far below, followed by an echoing silence.

THIS silence was broken, presently, by a fresh pound of hooves on the road, and Drew Pearsall, riding a wiry little cayuse, swept into sight, rifle clutched across the saddle. He pulled up abruptly as, from where a clump of stunted brush grew among the rocks above the road, Sam Bleeker crawled to view and began to descend toward the road, still clutching a rifle in his own hands, from whose muzzle still drifted a faint wisp of smoke.

Pearsall's eyebrows lifted sardonically.

"I see you saw the smoke—and did the job," he nodded.

Bleeker smirked.

"Yeah," he agreed. "There wasn't no need for you to come tearin' along. He went over with it."

"I like to see to these things myself," Pearsall said, and dismounted, still holding the rifle. Lazily, carelessly almost, he swung the muzzle so that it centered on the startled Bleeker.

"Reckon you've finished your usefulness," he added. "If you were a big enough fool to believe that I wanted a double-crosser for a partner, you deserve what you're going to get. And it's only fitting for you to go down where Carver did."

There was terror, incredulity, a mingling of other emotions on Bleeker's flaccid face now. He tried to jerk up his own rifle, to shoot, but Pearsall was already firing with cold, deadly precision. Bleeker swayed, staggering on the very edge of the precipice, and as his legs gave way under him, pitched out of sight.

But something of the same terror and incredulity had come to Pearsall's own face. Sam Bleeker hadn't managed to fire, yet there had been something like an echo to Pearsall's rifle, and he managed to turn in the road now, making a tremendous effort to steady himself, to hold to his own gun. What he saw seemed to increase the fear in his eyes.

Carver stood there, smoking six-gun in hand. He eyed his enemy sardonically.

"Makes a good finish, doesn't it, Pearsall?" he asked. "I tried to get you in time to save Sam, but I couldn't make it, quite. Though I guess he got what was comin' to him, at that."

"But—but he said you went over —"

"He made a little mistake," Carver said bleakly. "I didn't go all the way over. When I saw how it was, I dropped a loop over that old limb, and though I got quite a jerk, swingin' out over the edge, I hung on, swung back to the tree and climbed back up in time for the finish. And I reckon this is the finish, Pearsall." It was the finish. Pearsall was trying, with a grim tenacity of hate, to lift the rifle again. But even his will could not master the growing dissolution in his limbs. Instead, the gun slipped from nerveless fingers, his legs buckled even as those of Sam Bleeker had done, and, like him, he tottered back against nothingness and outward.

His own face still set, Carver holstered the gun again, caught Pearsall's horse and swung to the saddle, heading on toward town. It would soon be time for a stage, a Carver stage, to start rolling out again.

THE END

THE COYOTE

A Fact Article

by KENNETH P. WOOD

THE COYOTE has been called an outcast by a famous poet. He is universally conceded to be a sneak, a thief, and an arrant coward. He is a lier-by during the day, and a wanderer by nights; a dissipated wretch in whose whole history there is not a redeeming trait. He has an extensive connection, but no family. He is disowned by the dogs, and not recognized at all by respectable foxes. The gaunt gray wolf who sends his hoarse voice across the ravine in a howl the most dismal and harrowing that ever disturbed midnight and silence, will have no fellowship with the little thief who seems to have stolen his gray coat, and would prefer to be counted among his poor relations.

There is no lower form of contempt and reproach in the West than to be called a coyote. It usually calls for gunplay. And yet the coyote is the representative animal of the border country. It is his triangular visage, his sharp muzzle, especially fitted for the easy investigation of the smallest aperture into other people's affairs, his oblique, expressionless eyes, that should have a place in the adornment of escutcheons and the embellishment of title pages. The buffalo, who was his successful rival in such matters, occupies the place because his shaggy, stupid head is big, but the buffalo is not the representative of anything more than brute ponderosity.

He has roamed in countless thousands over the plains for hundreds of years, and during all that time he has never even bellowed. There is no degree of pleasure, anger, excitement or passion that could induce him to make a sound other than a guttural groaning that ill became his size. That great equipment of lungs and throat and nostrils was good for nothing in acoustics, and while he might have made the valleys echo, and might have almost shaken the hills, he spent his life in galloping, fighting, butting at sandbanks, and eating. Especially did he affect the latter. His life was one long process of deglutition and rumination. He never stole anything. He never made the moonlit hours hideous for love of his own voice.

Colossal in size and fearful of aspect, he was so dull as to be incapable of self-defense. None but a great booby would deliberately get himself exterminated by running alongside of a slow-moving railway train, to be shot by kid glove sportsmen, and even by women, three or four score times, in the back, with silver-mounted pocket pistols. His stupidity was illustrated for years by the countless bleaching skulls and faded tufts of brown hair which marked his death-place at the hands of people to whom the riding of a mustang would have been an impossible thing and the killing of a jackass rabbit a wonderful feat of skill and valor.

Not so his existing neighbor and actual master, the coyote. He will lengthen out the days of his years until his voice sounds hollow and thin and aged in the watches of the night. Nothing but infinite pains and insidious strychnine will end his vagabond life. As his gray back moves slowly along at a leisurely trot above the tall reeds and coarse grass, and he turns his sly face over his shoulder to regard you, he knows at once if you have a gun. The coyote is a reflective brute, and has an inquiring mind. Only convince him of the fact that you are unarmed, and he proceeds to interview you in a way that, for politeness and unobtrusiveness, is recommended as a model to some certainly more intelligent but slightly less obtrusive animals.

As he sets himself complacently down upon his tail at the summit of the nearest hill, and lolls his red tongue, and seems to wink in your direction, he is so much like his cousin, the dog, that you can hardly refrain from whistling to him. Make any hostile demonstration, and he moves a few paces further on, and sits down again. Lie down in the grass and remain quiet for a little while, and by slyly watching him out of the corner of your eye you will discover

that he has been joined by a half-dozen of his brethren and friends. Slowly they come creeping nearer and nearer, and are cautiously investigating you on all sides.

OUR skulking friend has an object in all this, aside from mere frivolous curiosity. He knows that all flesh is grass, and now wishes to find out—first, if you are dead; and second, supposing you are not, if there is anything else in your neighborhood that is eatable. You rise up in sudden indignation, and scare the committee away. In such case you have offended the coyote family deeply, and they retire to a safe distance, and bark ceaselessly until they have hooted you out of the locality.

That night he and his friends will come and steal the straps from your saddle, the boots from under your head, the left-over meat from the frying pan (and politely clean the pan), and the pony's bridle. Nothing that was originally of animal origin, or that has the faintest flavor of grease, though it be but the merest reminiscence, comes amiss to him. Through a thousand variations in his family history, and through all the vicissitudes of a haphazard life, the disposition to be continually gnawing something remains unchanged. There is not more formidable array of ivory than his, and his greatest delight is ever to have something rancid between his teeth.

There is a distant collateral branch of this extensive family, which has been for ages noted for the artistic and incomparable roguery of all its members—the first beast with which a child becomes acquainted—the fox. He has, since that far dawn of intelligence in which illustration became, as it is still, the chief means of teaching, illustrated more pretty fables than all other beasts. He has beautified more stories and picture books, and employed more artistic skill. In reality he possesses but one advantage over the coyote, and that consists in his proverbial swiftness of foot. His tail is no bigger or bushier, and his coat no grayer or thicker. Probably neither of these rivals in the science of thievery can lay any great claim to personal beauty, and, considering his want of speed, the coyote is the better beast of the two, in the particular business in the pursuit of which they are both distinguished.

Upon the great plains of the Southwest, and in the mountains of New Mexico, one is sometimes puzzled to know where a beast so wanting in ferocity and so slow of foot can possibly obtain his daily provender. The truth is that he has to live by his wits. No one ever saw a starved coyote. He does not confine himself to any particular diet, and wherever he may wander or rest he is evidently always intent upon his next meal. He would greatly distinguish himself in that ancient occupation, the robbing of hen roosts and the abduction of domestic fowls, only there are none in his dominion to steal.

But he is not discouraged, and does not abandon his profession on that account. He has the Chinaman's epicurean fancy for birds' nests, and follows the mountain quail to her bundle of twigs, and daintily laps the inner sweets of a dozen eggs, and retires like a man from a free lunch, slyly wiping his chops with his tongue. In the dead hours of the night he creeps upon the covey resting in the tall grass, their tails together and their heads beneath their wings, and even the wary old whistler who leads his family daily over the intricate miles of their habitat himself dozing, and throwing his sprawling forepaw suddenly over as many as he can, leaves the rest to whirr screaming away in the darkness, and learn from him a lesson in family vigilance for the future.

The jackass rabbit, doomed to fame partly on account of his grotesque auricular development, but also because of his beady eyes, his supposed foolishness, and his extraordinary swiftness in continual races with the only thing that can keep anywhere near him—his own shadow—frequently falls a victim to the cunning of this marauder, at whom, in ordinary circumstances, he might be supposed to sit upon his hind legs and smile derisively. Jack is sometimes tempted by a damp and shady nook to lie upon his back like a squirrel, and, with his ears conveniently doubled under him and his gaunt legs in the air, to sleep too soundly. Then the coyote creeps cautiously upon him, licking his lips, and as silent as though his voice had never wakened the lugubrious echoes. He may be an hour in the task, but finally makes a spring not the less effective because it is very awkward, and the poor rabbit takes subjectively his last lesson in gnawing.

The virtue of perseverance shines brightly in the coyote. All these things require an inexhaustible fund of patience. Of course he fails in many of his nefarious designs, but none the less does he try, and try again.

There is a notable instance in which this

quality alone brings him victory, and that is in his contest with the buffalo. In this, since the supply of meat must necessarily be large, he makes common cause with all his hungry relatives. The old bull, after many years of leadership, and after becoming the father of a horde of ungrateful descendants, is finally driven forth by the strong necks and ingratitude of his younger associates to ruminate with two or three of his own class, retired patriarchs, while the herd wanders far off and forgets.

THEN the coyotes take him in charge. Wherever he goes they follow. He dare not lie down, and weariness helps to overcome him. Finally they begin to harass him openly, and with increasing boldness. A gray assassin is on every side. The buffalo is too imperturbable a brute to succumb to mere barking, and his enemies finally begin to bite. The contest may last several days, and be fought over a territory many miles in extent. But the old monster is worried, crippled, and ultimately brought down, and a snarling feast is begun, which is continued until the last bone is picked bare. The beef is none of the best, but the raider is content with substantial blessings.

But all the coyote's other modes of obtaining a livelihood are mere by-play to the great business of his life, which is stealing. For a long time it has been supposed that a cat approaching the cream pitcher, and a weasel intent upon coveted eggs, were the ideals of sly cunning and predatory silence. But it is time the Western coyote should have his due, and there is no doubt that, in the exercise of a preternatural talent for silent appropriation, he excels all the sharp-smelling and light-footed night wanderers. He has a curious penchant for harness, rawhide, boots, thongs, saddles, and old leather generally. He gnaws the twisted greenhide lariat from the pony's neck, and bodily drags away the kak and chews it beyond recognition by the owner.

He enters the open ranch window, and steals the accoutrements from the stockman's bedside and the boots from under the chair. He will walk backward a mile, and draw after him a rawhide that is dry and juiceless as a board. It would seem that he did all these eccentric things for the sake of food alone. In the majority of instances, the articles are beyond mastication even by a coyote's tireless jaws. He steals, as men do, because he is a born thief. He is greatly gifted in every accessory of his chosen profession. In the olfactory sense he is a phenomenon. The savory odor of the campfire frying pan reaches him at an inconceivable distance.

With drooping tail and abject head, he comes stealthily near like a wilderness phantom, and his appearance in the darkness is the very picture of treachery. He is patient, and will not be driven far, but sits down a hundred yards away, he and all his kin, and invests the encampment, and longingly licks his lips, and waits. Before long, the little fire, that is like a glow-worm in the wide darkness, and the tired, lounging figures around it, are surrounded by a cordon of patient, harmless, hungry thieves, who lick their jaws and faintly whine in expectation.

These are the times, and only these, when the coyote is silent. Upon all other occasions his voice is his pride and glory, and he sits on haunches, throws back his head in the ecstasy of discord, and gives it to the wind and the night in a rapid succession of discordant yelps which seem ceaseless for hours together. In fact, the coyote's bark is the prominent feature of night in the wilderness. To one unaccustomed to it, sleep is impossible. In spite of the knowledge of the brute's cowardice and general harmlessness, it is impossible to banish restlessness and some feeling of fear. After the fire dies out, as the sleepless and discordant hours pass, you long for morning and peace.

Coyotes and Indians are supposed to be on good terms always. They are somewhat alike in general characteristics, and have a supposed mutuality of interests. They both objected to the invasion of the white man in the West, and both are contemporary occupants of a country that can not long remain the home of either. But the coyote's dislike to the invader seems to be only an unreasonable prejudice, for he has been furnished more feasts upon the carcasses of causelessly slaughtered buffaloes in a single year than the Indian would have given him in ten.

BUT the gray-coated prowler makes a near approach to respectability in one item—he is a creature of family—for which he duly provides. Any morning in early spring, upon some dry knoll, may be seen three or four little dun-colored stupid-looking cubs, lazily enjoying the warmth. At

the slightest alarm they tumble, with more alacrity than gracefulness, into the mouth of the den, from which they never wander far, and many hours patient digging will not unearth them. Not far away may be seen the mother, uneasily watching the course of the intruder's footsteps. But provision for the support of a family is not carried so far as it is with the foxes.

There are but few choice morsels carried to the den, and the adolescent thief must mainly subsist upon his mother's scanty udders until he has attained his teeth and his voice, when he is launched upon the wilderness world fully equipped by nature and instinct for the practice of all the variations of music and cunning, and to follow in the disreputable ways of all his ancestors.

He is a brute who is entitled to respect for his very persistent and professional course of knavery. He understands his business, and follows it. He makes a success of it. Contemptible in body and countless in numbers, he forages fatness from things so despised of all others that he becomes almost a producer upon the just plan of cooperative industry. He is utterly careless of the contempt that all other beasts seem to feel toward him, waiting for his revenge till the time of their feebleness and decay.

Like all cowards, he can fight desperately when he must, and there is many an ugly scar of his making. Winter and summer, in heat and cold, he wags his way along the prairie trails with the same drooping, quick-turning, watchful head, the same lolling red tongue, the same bushy ornament trailing behind, ever mindful of a coyote's affairs, ever looking for supper, the figure-head, the feature, the representative of the wide open spaces and desolate country of which he comes more nearly being master than any other creature.

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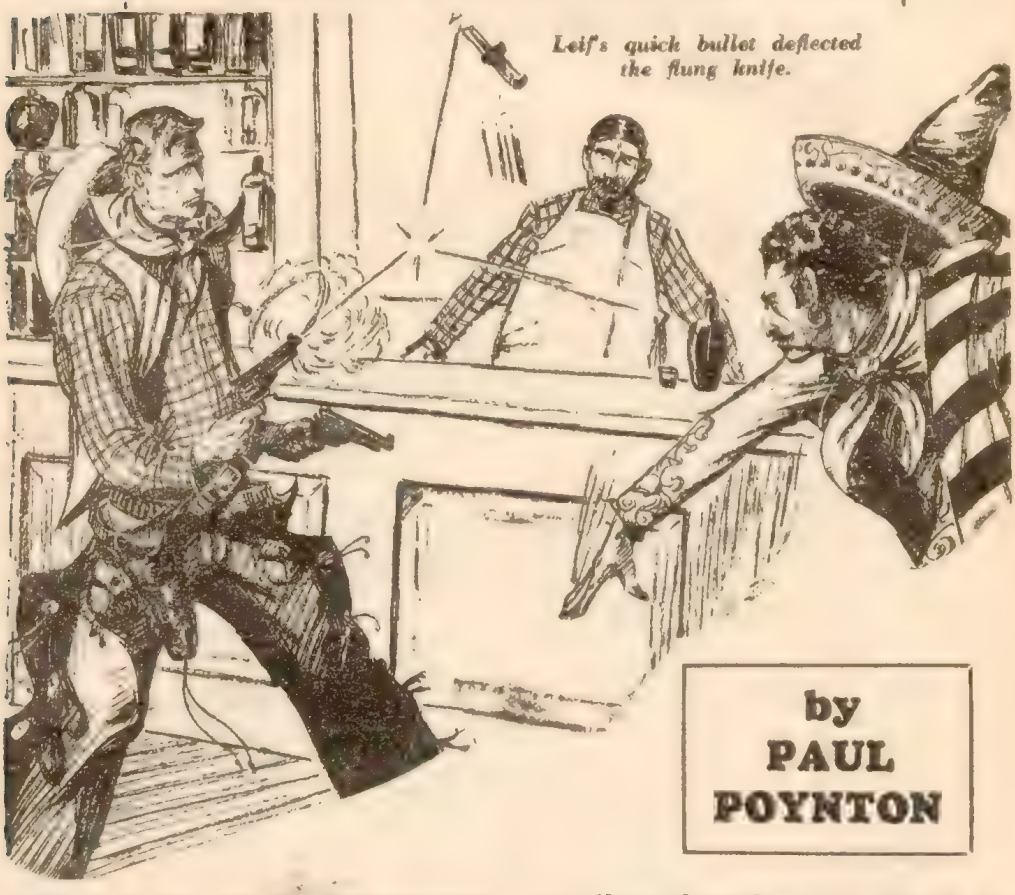
SIX-GUN EDITOR

A Colorful Tale of the Old West



Leif's quick bullet deflected the flung knife.

by PAUL POYNTON

When Leif Ericsen started the first newspaper in Taos, he found that an editor had to have fire in his Colts as well as his editorials. And fire was needed because a coyote outfit was trying to promote a war between Indian and White Man.

"EVER since the wagon train arrived in Santa Fe," bulky Mike Yurber growled, "that box has been where you see it. Just setting here in front of La Fonda."

"Well, I wonder what it is?" It was the soft-spoken Kit Carson who voiced the thoughts of the Mountain Men who clustered around the coffin-like box. Yurber rubbed his stubbled cheek, "Don't rightfully know, but from the shape, it might be government rifles."

"Couldn't be," Kit Carson shook his head with certainty. "The army wouldn't be fools enough to leave guns around in the open. It's too hard to get them here."

The small group looked at the box suspiciously. It did look as though it were just the right size to be holding government rifles. Mike Yurber

kicked the stout wooden side with the toe of his boot. His small, piggish eyes gleamed in his blowsy red face. He lifted his foot to kick again, but a quick shove caught Mike off balance and sent him sprawling into the alkali dust. He was too surprised to be mad. With a slow turn of his shaggy head, Yurber looked upward.

A young American stood over him. Even from his sitting position Mike could see the newcomer was not big. Taller by inches than Kit Carson, but not big enough to dare shove around Mike Yurber. Like a thundercloud creeping across the Sangre de Cristos, anger replaced Yurber's surprise. He jumped to his feet with a quickness surprising in a man so big. He clenched his fists till they were big and knotty as old pinon roots.

The newcomer stood his ground. A stray lock of sandy hair fell across his forehead as though to emphasize the warning Mike read in his even blue eyes.

"I wouldn't kick that box," the young man said.

Yurber hesitated. The giant half-breed raged inwardly, but there was something about this fellow he couldn't quite figure. The way he gritted his teeth till his jaw bones were dull blades rippling beneath his skin. And always those cold eyes staring, warning.

While Mike hesitated, trying to bring himself to smash the young upstart, the smaller man turned his back and signalled two Mexicans who stood on the fringe of the gaping Mountain Men.

"Pronto!" he commanded.

The Mexicans stepped forward and strained at the cumbersome wooden box whose copper-clad corners glistened in the Autumn sun.

They lifted it waist-high; then with a mighty effort balanced it upon their shoulders.

Even Yurber had stepped back to watch in silence.

With the Mexicans started, their leader started into the La Fonda. But he stopped shortly at the sight of Kit Carson.

"Why you bandy-legged old packrat!"

Carson laughed, "I thought I recognized your back, Leif. What's all the hurry?"

"Got lots of things to do. I heard you were in California with Kearney."

"Yes."

"Too bad you missed the trouble at Taos last Winter, Kit."

The scout nodded sadly. "If I'd been on hand, maybe I could have stopped the revolt."

Leif Ericsen nodded agreement. Kit Carson was not bragging. Mountain Men, Indians and Mexicans alike knew that the scout could have prevented the revolt that crimsoned the 'dobe walls of Taos. United States soldiers rushed up from Santa Fe. These Pork Eaters cornered the rebellious Indians and Mexicans in the Pueblo Church. They annihilated the leaders and hundreds of their followers. Taos was quiet now. But hate still welled in the hearts of the vanquished peoples. It was a deep hate, like the frigid stream that boiled down from Taos Peak. As soon as guns arrived from Santa Fe.

"It's done," Kit Carson reminded, "and it mustn't occur again."

YURBER found his tongue and sullenly growled, "It will happen again. Just as soon as some money-made fool comes along selling guns and powder to the Natives."

The half-breed looked at Leif a moment, then turned his eyes sug-

gestively toward where the Mexicans had taken the mysterious box.

Leif Ericsen looked defiantly at Yurber, but directed his answer to Kit Carson, "No decent American would do that, Kit."

"My sentiments, too, Kit."

The crowd melted away into the La Fonda, all except Mike Yurber who disappeared down dusty Burro Alley.

"I must have small-pox," Leif smiled grimly, "the way everyone hurried off."

He started into the La Fonda, but thought better of it. Leif whirled on his moccasined heels and headed down the winding alley. A patient burro nibbled hopefully at a clump of parched grass. Leif walked swiftly beneath yellowing cottonwoods. He moved with the slight rocking motion of a clipper ship in a spanking good breeze. A thousand miles and more from the sea, Leif Ericsen still bore the tell-tale mark of his Viking ancestors. The sleepy silence of Burro Alley was suddenly shattered by a scream. It came from a lane that ran off to the side just a few hundred yards ahead. Leif sprinted in the direction of the trouble. He saw Mike Yurber. The ape-like fellow was tussling with a girl.

Leif grabbed Yurber by his bull neck and with a mighty tug pulled him backward to trip over his own feet and drop heavily.

"What's the matter?" asked Leif of the frightened girl who drew her blue mantilla about her dark, tousled hair.

"This man," she started, but then her violet eyes filled with terror.

Leif turned to face a roar of oaths. Yurber flung himself forward, arms flailing madly. The young Viking dodged, and a bone-crushing left flicked past harmlessly.

"I'll teach you to butt in my business!"

He charged again. If only he could grasp Leif in his bear-like grip, Mike knew he'd make pulp of the young upstart. But Leif had other plans. He feinted with his right rand. Yurber hesitated. Only a second, but long enough for the lighter man to flash out with a wallop that rocked the giant. Then another, and another. It was like lightning. And almost as deadly. A final punch that filled the lane with the sound of its bloody efficiency, smashed Mike to the ground, out cold.

Leif fingered his knuckles, which felt as though he had smashed them into an adobe wall. He looked toward the girl who had witnessed the struggle.

"Thank you," she said softly.

Leif saw the look of freight was still in her eyes. They reminded him of the shy mountain violets one found sometimes when tramping around on a hunt for wild turkeys.

"Was Yurber bothering you?"

"Yes."

"Well, you won't have to worry about him now. Going somewhere?"

Leif flushed beneath his tan at his own forwardness. He'd never said such a thing before to any woman. And she was a woman, no doubt about that! He could see the outline of her well-formed body framed in a simple homespun dress. Her even features were pale, as though she had recently been ill. Or perhaps she'd been thru some awful experience, Leif thought.

"I'm all right now." With a quick smile of gratitude, she hurried away and was lost around a corner in the lane. As long as he could, Leif followed her....with his eyes. Then with a scornful glance at Yurber sprawled unconscious in the dirt, Leif

continued his way down Burro alley. He passed several adobes before he finally stopped. As he stooped to pass thru the low doorway, a flash of steel sizzled past his head and buried itself in the far wall of the single room adobe. Leif was hardly aware of the knife until he saw its quivering wickedness embedded in the wall ahead. He turned. There was no one in the alley. He ran back to where Mike Yurber had been stretched out just a few minutes before. The man was gone.

LEIF retraced his steps to the adobe where a frightened Mexican waited.

"What is it, senor?"

"I don't know for sure, but I have an idea."

The Mexican explained, "I was over near the window when I looked up and saw you entering. Then, like a snake, it whizzed past your head."

"Forget about it, Francisco," Leif told the Mexican, "and now, how are things getting on?"

Francisco shrugged his shoulders, "I am what you call stumped."

Leif tossed his hat onto the knife embedded in the wall. "Might as well use it as a hat peg," he laughed. Then he followed the Mexican across the room and looked into the massive wooden box resting on the earthen floor. A finger of light from the window pointed at its contents.

"You said you knew how to work a printing press, Francisco."

"Si, senor, I do. I worked with Padre Martinez in Taos. I helped him print many books. But this thing," the puzzled fellow shook his head dejectedly, "it is too much for me."

"Don't worry. We'll soon get it working."

Leif rolled up his sleeves. His arms were white where his buckskin shirt had protected them. But two hours later, things had changed. The American was besmeared with grease. He might have been a brother of Francisco who watched him work grimly at the press. Leif straightened up with a groan and felt the small of his back, only to leave an inevitable grease smear.

Francisco asked anxiously, "Is it ready now, do you think it will work?"

"We'll see. Have you sorted out the type?"

"Si, Senor Leif. You will find the type faces in these fonts."

Deftly, the American selected type.

"That will do as a starter. Now we'll slip it in place, like so. And you feed in the paper, Francisco."

"It is ready."

Leif reached over into the heavy wooden box and pulled out a can. He poured out vicious-looking fluid that oozed across the type.

"And now, Francisco, let's see if the contraption works."

The Mexican spun the wheel that controlled the hand-press.

"Si, senor, look what it says. 'Santa Fe's best newspaper.' "

"And it will be, too. I'll handle the part of the paper that will be printed in English. You can take care of the Spanish page."

Leif made ready to head for the Governor's Palace. He wanted a message from the governor for his first edition.

"At least, he can wish us good luck," the new editor laughed. "And you can set type while I'm gone. Just steal news out of the St Louis paper that came in with the last wagon caravan. The stuff may be months old. But it will be news to Santa Fe."

It was dark by the time Leif returned. He hurried into the adobe

printing office. The room was pitch black.

"Francisco! Where are you?"

Leif fumbled his way thru the black silence to the table he knew to be in the center of the room. His moccasins squished as they slid thru a slimy mess on the floor.

His finger tips found the candle setting on the table. A solitary ember still twinkled in the corner fireplace, and it took but a second to light the candle. In its flickering glow, the room stood out in weird relief. There was something wrong. Leif felt it. Then as he turned toward the hand printing press, he saw what he had sensed. Francisco was haunched over the small machine.

"Francisco! What is the matter? Are you drunk?"

LEIF grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him.

"Wake up, man!"

Slowly he let the Mexican fall back across the press. Leif had seen the pool of blood, not ink, that had drained from Francisco's body. He looked at his moccasins.

"It was his blood, not ink, that I stepped in."

The blonde young American clenched his fist. His face was pallid in the candle's soft light.

"I'll get the dirty rat that did this, but who...."

His voice trailed off as he searched his mind desperately for some reason why his friend had been murdered. Leif pulled his hat from his head. He tossed it across the dimly lit room toward the knife embedded in the wall....the knife that had so nearly taken his own life.

The deerskin hat hit the wall and fell to the floor.

Still deep in thought about Francisco's murder, Leif walked over and picked up the hat. He reached to hang it on the knife. But the knife was gone!

Death came cheap in Santa Fe. A dead Mexican was not enough to cause a shrug in the Frontier town's everyday life.

Leif Ericsen saw things different, though. Francisco had been his friend. His murder must be avenged.

The trappers at the La Fonda told him to forget it. Even friendly old Rob Burns reminded him, "You got no rrreal prrroof, laddie. You don't know furrr shurrre that Yurber's the killer."

"But I feel that half-breed's the one who stabbed Francisco."

"Betterrr be careful you don't feel something else....a knife in the middle of yourrr back. Yurber wouldn't stop at shutting your talk by sneaking up behind you some darrrk night and puffff."

"There you go, Rob, you admit yourself he's a rat."

"Shurrr, laddie, I don't like his ways, but," the old Mountain Man shrugged his shoulders, "what American here in Santa Fe does stomach the greasy half-breed?"

"I'm going to get Yurber for this murder. What's more, I owe him plenty for the way he banged up my printing press."

Rob Burns laughed kindly, "Santa Fe don't need no newspaperrr, laddie."

Leif chaffed at his mountain friend's attitude. He started to defend his plan for a newspaper, but left his feelings unspoken. Instead he asked, "Where's Yurber?"

Rob Burns replied, "Saw him headed norrrth along the Rio Grande late last night. Understand he was going to Taos."

Leif started away. Rob called after him, "Whurrr you going?"

"To Taos."

Leif stopped just long enough to saddle his horse and gather a few supplies. Then he headed out of Santa Fe. He followed the Rio Grande del Norte up thru the canon. That night he camped in a clump of cottonwoods. He built a small fire to heat water for coffee, but smothered it as soon as possible. Leif did not want to chance anyone seeing his campfire.

THE gray hope of dawn found him on his way. He pushed his horse as fast as he dared. The sun had crept high in the sky when he first heard the shrill piping. The sound came again. Its weirdness was like the agonized wailing of ten thousand souls in some distant hell.

Leif rode toward the unearthly piping. Three, four, ten minutes, and he seemed no closer. Then he came upon three small wagons toiling along the narrow trail.

The rear guard heard his horse, and fell behind the small wagon train to greet Leif.

"Hi, there."

"Hello," replied Leif, then as he came closer, "Hello, Pete, you old rascal. Headed for Taos?"

"Yup."

"Your wagons?"

"Nope. They belong to Bent. I'm taking them far as Bent's Fort, then turning back for Santa Fe. You might as well ride along with us as far as Taos."

Leif shook his head with a grateful smile, "Thanks, but I'm in a powerful hurry. Have you seen Mike Yurber?"

Old Pete Brown shook his head. "Neither hide nor scalp."

Leif waved a friendly farewell and urged his horse ahead. He passed the last two wagons. As he came abreast of the leading wagon, he glanced at the driver. It might have been a hunch. Call it anything, Leif was grateful the minute he saw the girl he had helped back in Santa Fe. She sat huddled beside the driver and his wife.

Leif smiled broadly, "How are you?" He reined in his horse to match the wagon's plodding pace.

"Oh, it's, it's you."

"Yes, it's me. Which means what?"

The girl blushed, "Pardon me, I was so surprised. I just meant, how are you?"

"Fine. You seem none the worse after your trouble with Yurber."

"Let's not talk about it."

Leif rode along in silence. Once again he became aware of the weird piercing of the distant pipe.

"What is that?" he asked the girl curiously.

A look of utter sadness swept across the girl's lovely face.

"It could be most anything. So many terrible things have happened to me here in this country, that I'd believe any tale."

Leif leaned solicitously toward the girl. His horse seemed to sense his master's concern, and moved closer to the slowly moving wagon.

"Terrible things....to you?"

"Yes, my mother and father died just before we reached Santa Fe. We worried so much about getting thru the Indians. But everything went all right until our last night out from the end of the trail. Mother and father drank some water. It must have been poisoned. They were dead in a few hours."

"I'm sorry."

THE girl brushed back her tears, "I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't burden you with my troubles."

"If only I could help you some way."

"Thank you. I'll get along. I'm going to Taos, then on to Bent's Fort. I expect to catch up with a caravan there and go back to St. Louis, where I have relatives."

"It's been hard, Miss," Leif Ericsen paused in embarrassment. His bronzed face deepened in color at the realization he didn't even know the girl's name.

"I'm Judith Davis."

"Well, maybe I should tell you my name. "I'm...."

Leif stopped as he heard a roar on the steep mountain side above them. He looked up in time to see a giant rock come bounding down straight toward them. He stared helplessly as he saw it crashing down. Then it happened. The giant boulder hit another rock embedded in the mountain. It bounded high across the rider. Barely grazing the wagon top, it plummeted with a terrific splash into the Rio Grande.

Pete Brown rode up.

"What happened? Is it a landslide?"

With a sigh of relief, Leif shook his head. "No, it isn't." Then he gritted his teeth. "There's only one rat that'd start that big rock."

The determined American swung his horse sharply and started up the mountain side. The faithful animal picked his way carefully thru the scrub pinon and rugged boulders.

Leif was not quite sure. But he thought he saw a lone horseman disappear over a distant rise. The figure seemed to float away into nothingness.

"I'll catch up with Yurber this time." Leif urged his horse on desperately. As he galloped along, the mysterious piping that had filled his ears for so long, became more distinct.

But Leif was over the rise and practically in the midst of a band of hooded figures before he realized he was at the very source of the blood-tingling piping. His utter concentration upon catching up with Yurber had dulled his natural sense of caution. Before he could reach for his rifle, two hooded figures leaped forward and dragged the lean American from his horse.

"What do you want?"

Leif tried desperately to free himself from their power.

"What you want?" The fierce question was hurled at him again. The words were English, but the accent might have been Mexican, or perhaps that of Indians who came to trade at white settlements.

Leif tried to assume some amount of dignity, despite his awkward position. "I was looking for someone."

The hooded figure who seemed to be the leader snarled his reply, "Throw him in the 'dobe. We'll take care of you later."

Cruel hands pushed Leif toward the 'dobe house. At first, the young American had not noticed the earthen hut off to one side. He saw it now, realized that its deep walls and barred windows were an impenetrable prison. Leif was flung into the dim interior of the 'dobe, and heard the door slam shut after him. He hurled himself back across the room and crashed into the heavy door. It did not budge. Mocking laughter filtered thru the windows. By standing on tip toe, Leif could see out of the barred window next to the door. He saw the hooded figures

of his captors returning to the main group.

"I wonder what they're up to?"

LEIF saw the group lengthen out into a long line. The weird piping resumed. Then it was that Leif Ericsen sensed the meaning of the entire affair.

"These people are Penitentes," he whispered to himself.

Leif had heard of the Brothers of Light, who were supposed to torture themselves at certain times of the year, but had dismissed the tale as just another of the fantastic legends that surrounded the superstitious Mexicans and Indians.

Leif didn't want to believe the sight confronting his eyes. But there it was, no denying the fact. He stretched further to see more.

The chief Penitente was at the head of the slowly moving procession. He carried a life-size Crucifix ....obviously carved by local craftsmen and mirroring a gauntness suggestive of sparse New Mexican deserts.

A Reader walked beside him, chanting the Penitente ritual. On the other side was the fluter, whose shrill blood-curdling piping pierced the very marrow of Leif's bones and made him shudder as he looked out from his 'dobe prison. They were the leaders. Behind came a penitent dragging a low cart with solid wooden wheels. It was pulled along by a horse-hide rope drawn over the suffering man's shoulders and fastened under his armpits.

"What can that thing be?" Leif muttered to himself.

He had espied a small figure seated in the wagon. It was draped in black and held a taut bow with arrow poised for flight. This was Death. Leif recalled rumors of the ghastly figure, how in distant days the arrow was mysteriously released to pierce the heart of a mocking bystander.

The young American involuntarily pulled back from the window.

"Maybe I'm safer here in the 'dobe than I'd be outside."

In the wake of the cart and its ghastly burden came five men, one struggling behind the other. Each carried a full-size wooden cross, big enough to hold a man. They tottered wearily under the tremendous loads, but somehow managed to stay on their bleeding, bare feet.

At the rear, Leif could see twenty Penitentes who scourged themselves with yucca lashes as they walked along. The sharp cactus spears were thrown back to bite into the flesh between the shoulder blades.

The weird group stopped in front of a small building close by the one in which Leif was imprisoned. Crosses were stacked outside, and the Penitentes entered, slamming the door shut.

Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes. The young American peered out of his small window anxiously. He was suffering from his tip-toe position, but too fascinated to move. Coldness that crept in, now the sun was sinking lower, did little to comfort Leif.

The suspense was terrific when two Penitentes opened the door of their meeting place. They walked over to the small prison. Leif stepped back from the window and waited for them to come for him.

"They'll know they've been in a battle before they get me," Leif growled as he clenched his fists.

THE door did not open. After the first seconds of surprise, the prisoner stepped back to the window.

He peered out. The Penitentes were busy with crude pick and shovel, busy digging a narrow deep hole directly in front of the small 'dobe prison.

Then they hoisted a heavy cross into position. Not quite satisfied, the hole was made deeper. This time the cross was more secure. The Penitentes took it down and returned to their meeting place. With much effort the cross was pulled inside.

This time, Leif found the wait even longer. Finally the door reopened. The ungainly cross was carried out. It bore a black-hooded figure, whose cotton drawers were rolled up from the knees like a loin cloth. The Penitentes roughly placed the cross in an upright position. It dropped into the hole with a sickening thud. The figure it carried was held in place by horsehair ropes.

Leif cried out, "Stop it, you murderers!"

The silence was overwhelming. Leif could almost reach out and touch the sufferer.

This hooded figure held his place for ten minutes, twelve. His head slumped down upon his breast. The cross was then lowered and returned to the meeting place.

Leif was covered with sweat. He shivered involuntarily as he sat down on a small bench.

"Now to just sit back and wait."

The wait was not long.

Sudden footsteps, then the outside bar was unloosed and four hooded figures stepped into the room. They jerked Leif to his feet.

"Come!"

The prisoner realized the hopelessness of fighting, and went along. His captors brought him to the other building. He was led into the midst of silent Penitentes. One seemed to be doing the talking, and he was arguing desperately.

"Kill the American dog! Look at him. He tried to spy on our rites."

Leif was unloosed. He stared around at the circle of hooded figures.

"I wasn't trying to spy on your rites. I was looking for....for someone."

The talkative Penitente argued on. His voice rose to a scream. "Kill him, hang him up on the cross and let the buzzards pick his bones white."

The plea for Leif's death went unanswered. The rest of the Penitentes apparently did not agree.

Leif took heart, "I don't understand your rites and such. But that's your business, not mine. I wasn't spying on you."

"Kill him!" the screaming Penitente argued. "The American dogs must all go. Get him out of the way now. It'll save us work later on."

Leif saw the other Penitentes were directing their gaze at the speaker.

With a quick jab, Leif bowled over the hooded figure nearest him. His shoulder sent another sprawling. He reached the door and crashed it open, but not before a yucca cactus had lashed out to bloody his cheek.

"I'll get him."

Leif recognized the voice as that of the Penitente who'd demanded his life. He sprinted toward the small pinon where his horse was tied. A sharp stone caught the toe of his moccasin, and made him stumble. As he dropped forward, a gleaming knife plunked into the deerskin jacket at his left shoulder. Leif could feel the quick warmth of flowing blood. He caught his stride again, unmindful of the deep pain. Leif reached back and pulled the blade free. Then he

was upon his horse. A quick slash with the knife freed the animal. He leaped upon its back and galloped from the very arms of pursuing Penitentes.

Leif looked down at the knife he had stuck in his belt. "I thought you felt familiar," he growled. "You belong to Yurber, all right. The first time you missed me. The second time you nicked my shoulder. And the next time you're going to end up in Yurber's dirty, conniving gizzard."

The weary American wanted to dress his shoulder and wash the blood from the yucca lash on his face, but he didn't slacken his pace until he reached the white-walled security of Taos.

LEIF headed straight for the American House. Only a few old trappers were in the place. They were busy in a corner with a game of Red Dog. Leif's question brought a quick shake of their heads. Then they quickly returned their attention to the cards. But as the blond American turned and walked slowly toward the door, their eyes looked up to follow him to the door. They'd heard that Ericsen had some debt to settle with Yurber. Maybe there'd be some excitement now. Nothing very much had happened since the massacre of last winter, and the subsequent trial when the Conspirators, Mexicans and Indians alike had been hung.

Yurber was as hard to find as the thin piping of the Penitentes' music.

Nearly a week had passed when Leif met Pete Brown at the American House bar.

"Have a shot of Taos Lightnin'," urged Pete, "it's good for what ails your guts."

Leif laughed good-naturedly, "Nothing wrong with my insides, Pete. I'll just sit by and watch you."

"Yes, you'll watch me, and wait for someone else to show up."

"You mean Yurber?"

"Everyone in town knows you're looking for him, Leif. And I've heard tell he might be looking for you, too."

"Then why doesn't he come out and fight like a man, not hide like the snake he is."

"Well," Pete scratched his head reflectively, then rubbed a drop of Taos Lightning from his tobacco-stained mustache, "that's the way a rattler is. You don't see him. Then he strikes just like. . .like this likker. Ugh!"

Leif was silent.

Old Pete continued, "Say that girl you know, Judith Davis, who came up with our train from Santa Fe, she's here in Taos right now."

Leif flushed, "I don't care. But where's she at?"

"Oh, as long as you don't care none, be foolish wasting my breath telling you where she's staying."

"You lop-eared coyote," grinned Leif, as he grabbed Brown by the shoulder, "you fuzzy old burro, tell me where. . ."

"If you really care to know, she's staying with Mrs. Bent."

"You mean the governor's widow?"

"Yes. And I hear tell that there's going to be a Fandango tonight. Mrs. Bent thinks she should do something to help cheer up the gal. It's going to be a long trip up to Bent's Fort and across east to her relatives."

Leif hated dances and such fofurraw, but darkness found him wandering across the plaza toward Mrs. Bent's adobe. Ahead he could see the fingers of light that stretched invitingly through open windows. Music

and laughter carried through the evening's hush.

Just before he reached Bent's home, Leif heard the pad of moccasined feet close behind him. Involuntarily his hand reached for the knife at his waist. He whirled about.

"Hello, Leif."

"How are you, Kit?"

"Headed for the Fandango?"

"Sort of. I heard there was to be a get-together tonight. And I thought I might look on for a while."

Leif flushed as he talked. Somehow he felt that Kit Carson was going to rib him about the affair. But the scout's face was grimly earnest.

"You'll be most welcome, but first, there's something I want you to help me do."

"Count on me, Kit."

"I knew I could. That's why I went over to the American House in search of you. When I couldn't find you, I was going to go alone."

"Going where?"

"Up to Blue Lake."

"That's where the Pueblo Indians always have their big pow-wows. And any white man even trying to get up to the lake would run into. . . into plenty of trouble."

THE two Americans had walked right past the adobe with its laughter and music. They were headed across the old Taos cemetery toward the Pueblo Road.

Kit laughed softly, "Trouble or no trouble, Leif, we both seem to be headed toward Blue Lake."

Ericsen nodded.

"In a way," Kit explained as they hurried along, "the Indians, and the others. . .expect us. Leastwise, they know I'll be there."

The new day's sun was high in the sky when the two Americans first caught the blue gleam of the lake through a parting in the pinons. Leif was dog tired, but refused to lag behind the terrific pace of wiry Kit. He followed close behind as the scout headed toward the narrow line of smoke that drifted up from the lake shore.

A lane opened in the Indians gathered at the Council Fire. The two Americans passed through to where the Governor of Taos Pueblo awaited them. He was flanked by medicine men.

"It is good," the Chief said deliberately. "You have kept your word."

"I have come to talk of peace."

The blanketed Governor shook his head. "Soon there can be no peace. My son is dead."

"I am sorry," Kit said simply. He explained to Leif, who stood silently at his side. "The son of Wind-Blew-Cold was shot, from behind. And he thinks an American did it."

"What proof has he?"

The Governor answered the question, "What proof have I? The Medicine Men have consulted the gods. They have given signs that you Americans are responsible. By my heart also do I know. Your soldiers killed our braves last winter, slaughtered them, even though they'd thrown down their guns in surrender. You will not be satisfied until you've killed us all. But that shall never be."

"You are wrong, Wind-Blew-Cold, we want to be your friends."

"Kit Carson, you are my friend. Your companion is safe here. But we don't want the friendship of your people. I told you years ago that before any war between your people and mine, we would hold a Council to discuss the trouble. Last winter you were gone, I could not reach you. But this time I keep my word. So good-

bye, Kit Carson. You are my friend, even now. But I know you will fight for your people as I fight for mine."

The Pueblo Governor stood motionless, but his braves stirred uneasily.

"My men will escort you back to the walls of Taos. But after that. . ."

Leif Ericsen broke into the Indian Chief's words, "Kit Carson has brought me here because he knows I can show the truth to you. Your son was not killed by an American, Wind-Blew-Cold."

The scout stared with open-faced amazement at his companion. "It was someone else. And I will show him to you. But I must have time."

The Indian scornfully reminded, "Time can make no difference. My son's death shall be avenged immediately.

"I ask but ten days."

"You will merely send for more soldiers, but my men are too strong. Other Pueblos will help us this time. Mexicans are armed and waiting our signal."

"Ten days is what I ask. Then I shall bring the murderer to your Pueblo. We'll not send for troops."

The Governor hesitated. His seamed face gave no hint of his final decision. The Americans waited. The Governor turned to his followers. He spoke wearily in his own tongue. Then he addressed the American scout. "As my friend, Kit Carson, I grant this last favor. But it can make no difference."

THE two Americans had almost reached Taos before Leif convinced Kit to help him with his plan.

"Sounds crazy to me, but if you think it'll work, you can count on me. You know, Leif, when I brought you to Blue Lake, I didn't know the Governor's son was dead. I thought he was going to get well. That's why I wanted your help in calming the Indians. Now it looks like hell broke loose again. It will be worse than the revolt of last winter. This time the Indians and Mexicans are armed to the teeth. We don't have enough soldiers to stop them."

"My plan may help, Kit."

"We shall see."

It was an unsuspecting Taos that saw Kit Carson ride hurriedly away the next morning. Leif Ericsen moved into a small adobe on the Pueblo road. He gave five American silver dollars to the Mexican owner. The money gave him the adobe's use for a year. It was partly furnished with a rough-hewn table and bench. A stack of blankets along the side wall was the bed. Leif threw open the door and loosed the shutters to try to rid the adobe of its chili odor.

Leif remained close to his adobe home. He even cooked his own meals of leathery tortillas and coffee. He did ride out one day and grub around for a gnarled pinon root. When he found one that suited him, he returned to his cabin with it.

It was the ninth day before Kit Carson returned. He drove a wagon team this time. The scout went straight to Leif's adobe.

"There it is. I thought I'd never get it here."

"Now I'll live up to my part of the bargain."

Kit left his friend alone. He passed the adobe in the evening, but did not enter. Amber light behind the partially closed shutters told the scout that Ericsen was still working on his plan. Kit spent the night at Pete Brown's adobe. He slept the sleep of exhaustion. The sun was high before he'd washed and sauntered out into the Plaza buzzing with excitement.

"Have you seen the paper?" Padre Martinez was first to ask Kit.

"The paper?"

"The newspaper, Taos Tribune, it's called. Here, look at it."

Kit Carson slowly glanced over the small sheet. The type was smudged by many hands.

"Maybe you'd better tell me what it says, Padre. I'm not much on reading."

A crowd gathered around to listen. None save the Padre could read, but all held copies of the Taos Tribune. The paper had been everywhere that morning. At door steps, tacked to trees, strwn about the plaza.

Padre Martinez began. "The big letters across the top say: 'Traitor Murders Indian', then this smaller type here says the son of Wind-Blew-Cold was killed by a renegade trying to start war between Americans and the Natives."

Many of his listeners stirred nervously at the thought of the guns and ammunition they held at home. The Padre had said war was bad, but he did not understand.

"What does it say under the picture?" Kit Carson asked.

"It says this is how the murderer betrayed the son of the Pueblo Governor."

The scout stared at the picture. It, too, was smudged. But Kit saw a hulking figure with piggish eyes and cruel lips drawing a bead on a smaller figure whose back was turned.

"And the Taos Tribune says the murderer was caught today."

"Who is he?" Carson asked.

Padre Martinez shook his head. "I do not understand. I know of nothing."

KIT hurried to Leif's adobe. He was gone, so the scout rode out to the twin Pueblos on Taos Creek. He went directly to the headquarters of Wind-Blew-Cold. But it was Leif who greeted him at the door.

"Come in, Kit," the younger man invited grimly. "Wind-Blew-Cold is letting me use his place to keep an appointment."

There was a sound of footsteps outside.

"Quick! Wrap this blanket around your body and head. Then turn your back to the door."

Piggish eyes peered in and saw two huddled Indian figures.

"It's a lie, Chief, I didn't kill your son. I am your friend. The soldiers murdered him."

Strong arms grabbed the visitor from behind.

"Tell your men to leave me alone, Chief, I didn't do anything."

Leif Ericsen slowly turned to face the frantic speaker. His blanket dropped to the floor.

"We meet again, Mike Yurber."

"You rat! You're the one who printed that picture. But it isn't me! Leave me go!"

Wind-Blew-Cold stepped into the room and signalled his braves to unloosen their captive.

"I am your friend," the half-breed pleaded. "I sold your guns to help you against the Americans."

Carson whistled softly with understanding. Leif asked the Chief, "Do you not think this man is your son's murderer?"

Wind-Blew-Cold fingered the paper in his grasp. He looked at the sheet again. He appraised Yurber, and examined the picture again.

"It is a picture of you, and you are shooting a boy in the back. . . my son."

Grim figures closed about the renegade.

He screamed, "I didn't mean to do it. Your boy was to blame. He ran in front of me when I was shooting at a wild turkey."

Yurber struggled desperately to escape the iron hands that held him.

Wind-Blew-Cold spoke to the two Americans.

"You were right. This man tried to plunge us into war so he might sell us more guns and powder. Let Yurber loose!"

The braves stepped back. The half-breed leaped through the door.

Leif started forward, but Kit restrained him.

"Yurber is escaping. I have a debt of my own to settle with him."

"Wait."

A single shot rang out. Nothing more. An Indian Medicine Man entered the room and raised his hand to the Pueblo Governor.

Wind-Blew-Cold broke the oppressive quiet. "It is done. The traitor has been punished as deserved, with a bullet in the back of his head. My son has been avnged. There shall be no war. The Americans are my friends."

Carson accompanied Leif back to his adobe. A printing press was standing in the corner.

"I hate to think what might have happened if you had not returned in time with the press."

"There's one thing I can't understand," the scout replied, "where'd you get that picture you printed?"

"I carved it out on the toughest piece of pinon wood I could find. It was a hunch, and it worked. I felt Yurber was trying to start trouble between the Americans and Natives. Then Yurber gave himself away."

"You did a fine job of carving that block, all right. The picture looked like Yurber."

Leif pulled a knife from his belt. "When Mike tossed this thing at me I swore I'd use it to get him one way or another. It turned out to be 'another' way. I used this blade to carve the block."

A SMALL figure stomped into the adobe. "You, you, you," she sputtered.

"Miss Judith, what's wrong?" Kit Carson asked solicitously.

"Mr. Carson, this, this person here," she glared at Leif. "He says here. . ." But Judith could say no more as anger and tears stopped her.

Kit Carson took the Taos Tribune from her and explained, "He was right about the murderer, Miss Judith."

"That's not what I mean. This piece in the corner."

"Read me what it says, Leif."

Judith glared at the blond young American. "Go ahead, read it. You have no shame."

"Well, it says 'Padre Martinez married Miss Judith Davis and Mr. Leif Ericsen Tuesday afternoon. It is rumored the newly-weds will live in an adobe on Pueblo Road.' "

"See, see, I told you he is a snake."

Kit Carson smiled broadly.

"The Taos Tribune can't be wrong. It is still Tuesday afternoon. And I know where Padre Martinez can be found."

"The nerve of you, Leif Ericsen."

Kit Carson continued, "What's more, I know where a couple of newlyweds might find a nice adobe. 'Course it has a newspaper press in it. But there still is plenty of room."

Judith smiled in spite of herself.

"You're as bad as Leif. You go and. . ."

"And what, Miss Judith?"

"Go and get Padre Martinez. The Taos Tribune is never wrong."

THROUGH HELL TO BREAKFAST

by LEE FLOREN

"Johnny Webb did you dirt, Todd. He stole your gal—she's marryin that polecat tomorrow. But a dead man can't go to a weddin', now, can he?" Duke Carter paused significantly. But Todd Price didn't want to kill his best friend. "Don't forget," murmured Carter, "that you rode with me and my gang when we held up the Limited, Todd. You'd better get Johnny Webb tonight!"

YOUNG Todd Price tried unsuccessfully to hide his surprise. "What'd you mean, Ann?" he asked.

Ann Merritt tossed her brown curls. "I mean just what I said, Todd!"

"But we're engaged," Todd said. "We been engaged for almos' a year. Then, outa a clear sky you ride in with Johnny here—an' you say you're goin' to marry him!" Todd glared at Johnny Webb. Johnny, a tall, well-built youth, answered his stony stare. Todd growled, "I oughta beat the heck—"

"None of that!" Ann ordered. "You brought this on yourself, Todd!"

"What'd you mean?"

"You've been going down-hill for a year, Todd; ever since you started drinking and gambling with Duke Carter and his gang of gunmen in the Ace Up saloon. And I can't marry a man—"

Todd interrupted bitterly, "So that's it, huh?"

Johnny cut in. "We're goin' to be married next month, Todd. I want you to be my best man."

"No wouldn't that be nice," Todd scoffed.

Johnny asked, "Well, how about it?" his tone softened. "Heck, Todd, me an' you an' Ann has known each other since we can remember. You will, won't you?"

"Please," Ann asked.

Todd spat disgustedly. "Maybe I can't

make it. Next month is calf roundup, an' we'll be workin' the Lone Pine country. An' that's over sixty miles from here."

"Think it over," Johnny said. Then, to Ann, "Him talkin' about Lone Pine reminds me that I sold some cattle over in that section last week to Bart Jackson, an' I ain't got paid for 'em yet. Reckon I oughta ride over there this afternoon an' collect, 'cause ol' man Williams is sellin' me some saddle horses tomorrow, an' he wants cash on the line. I can be back by dusk." He looked at Todd. "Well, how about it, pal?"

"Drop in next week," Todd said, cynically.

Standing in front of the JF ranch house, Todd Price watched Johnny and Ann ride away, and his thoughts were bitter. So she had broken up with him because he liked to drink, to gamble, to hang around the Ace Up. And Johnny, his best friend, had beat his time.

"I'd like to kill him," Todd Price growled. But he knew he didn't mean it. He turned and clomped up the porch-stairs, his spurs clanging. Old Bill Price, his father, was sitting on the porch; he'd heard every word said. Now Old Bill laughed and said, "You lay a hand on Johnny, an' I'm rawhidin' you off'n the JF, even if I am almost seventy years ol'!"

"Don't rub me the wrong way!" Todd warned.

"I'll comb the cockleburrs outa you," Old Bill said, "an' I'll make you like it. So she quit you, huh? Now you can't take your beatin' like a good bronc, you're layin' down under the quirt!"

"Bottle that!" Todd snapped.

"Bottle, huh? That all you think about—a bottle of red-eye down in Duke Carter's joint? No wonder Ann quit you. You tried to rope her by showin' off. You, the son of Old Bill Price, Hanging Basin's biggest cowman! Well, she didn't fall for that. She picked Johnny."

"Picked a hard-lucked, down-at-the-heel cowdog with a two-bit spread," Todd said.

Old Bill's weathered eyes narrowed. "Johnny's worked hard, Todd. While you been drinkin' an' makin' a fool outa yoreself, Johnny's built up a cow-spread. Johnny—"

"Fergit it!" Todd snapped.

He went into the house, took his .45s and gunbelts, buckled them around his hips, and went to the corral. The saddle-broncs, milling and shying away from his coiled catch-rope, made a cloud of dust but through it he saw a big sorrel. His loop snaked out, made the catch.

The sorrel was spooky, and wanted to buck. Todd gave the brute his head, kicked him in the shoulders. The sorrel broke apart, bucking like a rodeo bronc. But Todd rode him easily, savagely. He jerked the bronc's head up, loped past the house.

"Ridin' into Culbertson to get drunk?" Old Bill hollered cynically.

Todd rode into Culbertson, tied his bronc, and entered the Ace Up. Duke Carter was behind the bar. He slid out a bottle and glass.

"Tough luck," he said.

Todd drank. "How'd you know?"

"They were in town this morning, and announced their engagement. Lotsa people in this burg think they did you dirt, Todd. Another drink?"

Todd drank again.

Duke Carter said, "Ann—" but Todd interrupted him with, "Shut up, Carter!"

Carter's eyes showed anger. "What'd you mean?"

"Don't mention her name in here," Todd said.

"I see," Carter said. He leaned close. "Don't forget you rode with me an' my gang the night we held up the Limited, Todd."

"How could I?"

CARTER said, "Johnny Webb did you dirt, Todd. . . . Well, there are ways . . . ." His voice was very low. "A dead man can't go to his weddin', you know."

"What'd you mean, Carter?"

"Use your head. . . ."

"You want me to kill Johnny?"

"Oh, no," Carter said mockingly.

"You're a dirty dog," Todd said.

Carter eyed him. "Think it over."

Todd said, "You've got a gun on you, Carter. Why not pull it?"

"Hant onto yourself," Carter said. "You must be loco, Todd. Here he steals your girl, an' you want to gun it out with me just because I said you oughta kill him. Remember that train holdup."

Todd said angrily, "You had ten thousan' dollars in IOUs I owed you, Carter. You said if I helped you stick up that train you'd forget the IOUs, you wouldn't collect on 'em from Old Bill. I did that. Now you're holdin' that over my head. I oughta gun you down!"

"Forget it," Carter said easily. He mopped the bar with a wet towel. "I'll be back in my office in an hour. Come in an' see me. But come in the back door through the alley. . . ."

"What'd you want to see me about?"

"Take another drink," Carter said.

Todd drank again, and Carter went into his office, where a gunman—a hard-cased gent—awaited him.

Carter asked, "What'd you fin' out, Magnus?"

"I trailed Johnny Webb, like you ordered, an' he took Ann Merritt to her ranch, then he hit across country toward Lone Pine." He added, "He rode fast."

"About what time tonight do you figure he'll come ridin' back?"

"Depends on whether he rode all the way to Lone Pine—"

Carter said, "He jus' went to Bart Jackson's."

Magnus pawed at his whiskery jaw. "About midnight, I'd say. Why?"

"He'll travel the North Road, won't he?"

"He should."

"Get on your bronc, an' ride out an' waylay him! Kill him!"

Magnus' brows rose. "Kill him?"

"You heard me!"

Magnus spat on the floor. "How much is in it?"

"Two hundred bucks."

"Chicken feed!"

"You takin' it?"

"Okay, Carter. Where's the dough?"

"You do the job first."

Magnus studied him. "Half now," he said softly.

Carter debated, paid him. Magnus, left, carrying his rifle. He did not go out the door that lead to the saloon; he went out the door leading to the alley. Carter took a chair, sat scowling. He didn't light a lamp; already it was dark out. Soon a big man opened the alley door, stood limned there.

Carter said, "Got a job for you, Wright."

"Yeah?"

"Todd Price is comin' in the office soon, through the alley door. Get your rifle, the one with the silencer. He'll come out of the saloon. The reason he comes in the alley door is because he don't want nobody in the saloon to see him come into my office from the saloon entrance."

"Where do I come in at, Carter?"

Carter said, "I want you to ambush him, in the alley. Kill him!"

"But I figgered he was your—"

"You're not hired to figure anythin'!" Carter growled. "Get out there, an' get him!"

"Okay, Boss."

Hidden in the darkness, Wright waited, rifle ready. Now he saw a man moving toward him and, despite the night, he recognized Todd Price. He lifted his rifle; it spoke once. . . .

Wright felt cold sweat along his spine. He didn't like this ambushing. He went into Duke Carter's office.

"I got him," he said.

Carter studied him. "You danged coward," he said. "You're scared stiff!"

Wright said, "What'd I do with him? You can't leave him—"

"Load him on a bronc," Carter said. "Take him out along North Road. You'll

meet Magnus out there, where the Lone Pine trail comes in."

"Magnus? What's he doin' there?"

Carter said, "Drag the lead outa you, Wright!"

"I don't like this," Wright said. "I don't know what it's all about; I don't like it!"

"Get out!"

Wright got his bronc from the barn, got Todd's horse, and loaded Todd across the saddle, tying his hands and feet to the cinch, and then he rode unnoticed out of Culbertson, leading Todd's cayuse. When he was a half a mile from town, he heard a rider coming fast from behind, and a panic struck him. Then he saw the rider was Duke Carter. Neither man spoke as they rode toward the Lone Pine trail.

Finally Carter said, "Is he dead, Wright?"

"Yeah, I reckon so."

"You reckon so?"

"I shot him in the head," Wright said.

NOW they rode into a shallow gully that had brush in it, and ahead across the trail they saw a man lying, and they drew rein. The man's horse stood with trailing reins nearby.

Carter called, "Magnus."

Magnus said from the brush, "Who's there?"

"Carter an' Wright."

Magnus rode out of the brush, toting his rifle under one arm. "I jus' shot him," he said. "I didn't know who you two were, so I was layin' low."

"You search him?" Carter asked.

Magnus said, "Yeah. . . . He didn't have anythin' on him."

Carter drew his .45, centered it on Magnus. "Cough up," he ordered.

"What'd you mean?"

"Johnny Webb had ten thousan' dollars on him," Carter said. "Give it to me, Magnus."

Magnus began with, "You're loco—" and Carter clicked his hammer back. "Don't swing that rifle aroun', or I'll kill you!"

Magnus dug into his saddle pocket, came out with a roll of bills; he tossed it to Carter. "It's all there," he said cynically. He added, "How did you know the kid was packin' that dinero?"

"That's fer me to know, an' fer you to fin' out!" He looked at Johnny Webb's inert form. "He dead?"

"Nope. . . . Shot in the shoulder. Want me to finish him?"

Carter frowned. "He'll do." He turned to Wright. "Untie Todd Price, dump him in the trail beside Webb, put his gun in his hand to make it look like they had a gunfight. Leave his hoss here. Hurry, you fool, here comes some riders!"

Wright dumped Todd on the trail, Carter asked, "Webb unconscious?"

"Conked his head on a boulder when he fell," Magnus said. "He's out cold."

"Good," Carter said. "Nobody'll ever know we did this. Todd Price is dead; that shuts his big mouth—he knew too much. We got Johnny Webb's dinero. We kilt two birds with one stone. Now get to hades out of here before them riders see us. They're comin' closer!"

But Carter was wrong. Todd Price wasn't dead. Wright's bullet had only grooved his skull, knocking him out cold. And when Todd regained consciousness. . . .he was in jail.

He sat up, his head bursting. He was on a steel cot, behind steel bars. He blinked, shook his head, opened his eyes—and still saw the bars

"What happened tuh me?" he asked himself.

Then he remembered. He had been going through the alley behind the Ace Up Saloon. But after that. . . ?

Stiff, sore, he hobbled to the barred window, peered out. Dawn was lighting the sky. He'd spent a night somewhere, and he didn't know where he'd spent it. He sat down on the bunk and hollered, "Come 'ere, somebody!"

A gray-haired oldster, wearing a sheriff's badge on his greasy vest, hobbled down

the cell aisle, and peered in at him. "What'd you want, Todd?"

"What'm I doin' in jail?"

"You shot Johnny Webb!"

"I shot Johnny Webb! Try another joke. What's the charge?"

"You shot Johnny Webb," the oldster repeated.

Todd got to his feet, stared at the oldster through the bars. "What happened?" he demanded hoarsely.

"The Circle C Bar boys foun' you an' Johnny layin' in the trail. Johnny come to, said as how somebody'd shot him from ambush—he got in one shot hisself, an' he musta got you with it. Johnny's money was gone."

"What money?"

"The dinero Bart Jackson'd paid him for them cattle."

Todd blinked. Then a thought crept through his agonized, bewildered brain. "Did I have the money on me when they foun' me?"

"Nope."

"I didn't shoot Johnny!'

"We got that all figgered out," the oldster said. "You musta shot Johnny, an' he shot you—but you musta managed to get the dinero off'n him, an' bury it someplace before you caved in. Where'd you cache it, Todd?"

"I ain't got it," Todd said angrily. "I never shot him!"

"Then how come they fin' you—?"

"That," said Todd, "is somethin' I can't answer. But use your head, Jenk. Why would I shoot Johnny? He's my friend!"

"He was your friend," the old sheriff corrected. "You own father heard you say you oughta kill him for winnin' Ann from you. You heard Johnny say he was ridin' after that money—"

"Oh, hell," Todd Price groaned.

TWO hours later his father, Old Bill Price, stalked down the cell aisle, halted and glared through the bars. "You're a dirty dog, Todd."

(Continued On Page 104)

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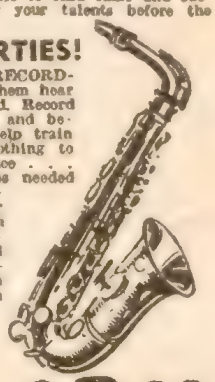

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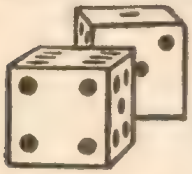

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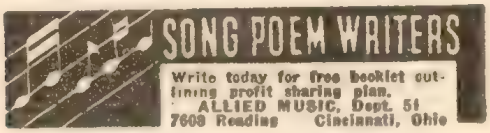
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(Continued From Page 103)

"Come inside an' tell me that," Todd invited coldly.

Old Bill's jaw squared, the lines hard in his face. "Did you shoot him, an' rob him?"

"What'd you think?"

Old Bill spat. "I don't think you did."

"You're right," Todd said. He told Old Bill what had happened—that is, as much as he knew about it. Old Bill looked puzzled.

"What's behin' all this, Todd?"

"I sure dunno, Bill."

"You was prob'ly hog-drunk," Old Bill snorted. "Prob'ly went off your bat, an' you don't know a thing about it. They tell me you was plenty drunk when you left the Ace Up."

"Get out," Todd ordered.

"T'hades with you. You want me to go your bail? They're holdin' your preliminary trial tomorrow."

"I won't be here tomorrow," Todd said.

Old Bill studied him. "You try a jailbreak," he said, "an' it'll only make things worse." His colorless eyes lighted suddenly. "Maybe I can get Johnny to drop charges, Todd."

"What does Johnny think?"

"He don't know what to think, Todd."

"Do what you want to," Todd said. "But somebody's behin' all this; an' I'm diggin' out who it is. An' I'm gettin outa jail to do it! But if it makes you feel good, you can go rootin' aroun' an' raise bail."

Old Bill sputtered, then turned and left.

Todd grinned, went to his bunk, sat down. Something was haywire here; somebody else had their finger in the pie. But who was it?

He choked down a cold, miserable breakfast, cooked by the sheriff on the office heater, but it made him feel better at that. Again, he tried to make some sense out of his present dilemma and, again, he failed.

At noon, Ann came to see him. She stood outside the bars, small and sweet, and looked at him with tears rimming her eyes, her hands gripping the steel. Todd gulped, and got off the cot.

"I'm sorry, 'Ann," he said.

"You didn't shoot him," she said. "I know you didn't, Todd."

"Then who did?"

"I don't know," she said stoutly. "But I do know you didn't!"

Todd felt better. He put his hands over hers. They looked at each other for a long moment. Then, despite the bars, Todd put his arm around her and kissed her. She put her arm around him, too, and she pushed something heavy into his pocket. Then she turned, fled.

Todd stared at her retreating back. Then he dug into his pocket. His fingers felt metal, and he came out with a .32 revolver.

"What the—?"

Todd sat on the bunk again. This didn't make sense. Here Ann, engaged to Johnny, had come to see him—and he was supposed to have shot Johnny. And she had kissed him, and smuggled him a gun. . . .

That sundown, Duke Carter came. Suave, sleek, he stood there, looking at Todd. Something in his eyes made Todd mad.

"Well?" Todd demanded.

"Hang onto yourself," Carter growled. "What happened?"

"I dunno!"

"You don't know! You gone nuts!"

"No, I dunno. An' what's more, I'm not repeatin' my story—nobody'd believe me, least of all you. Take it er leave it, Carter."

Carter smiled. "Okay, kid, okay. But there's talk runnin' aroun' town. . . ."

"Talk? What kinda talk?"

"Well, you been drinkin' a lot—an' raisin' heck. . . . An' there's people in this town who think a lot of Johnny Webb. . . ."

"Johnny's on his feet, ain't he?"

"Yeah, but. . . ."

"You're loco," Todd snapped. "They ain't no lynch talk!"

Carter grinned. "You're the boss," he said. He glanced hurriedly around. "Where's ol' Jenk?"

"He ain't aroun'."

Carter slipped a Colt .45 in Todd's pocket. "No man uh mine's rottin' in jail, Todd.

(Continued On Page 106)

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(Continued From Page 105)

Wright an' Magnus'll be over tonight. Think it over."

He left.

Todd sat down on the bunk. He balanced the .45 in his hand, his mind busy. If anything happened—if they did try to lynch him—he'd use the .45. It was the bigger gun, and more deadly. He kicked out a cartridge. He sat there, idly juggling the shell, his mind busy.

TODD PRICE had handled guns most of his life. And, right away, he noticed the .45 shell seemed too heavy. Using his teeth, he pulled the lead free, poured the powder into his hand. But the shell didn't contain powder; it held sand.

Todd stared, unbelievingly.

That evening he pondered it, doubting, wondering. Here Duke Carter, his friend, had smuggled him a gun—a gun loaded with fake bullets. What was behind all this? His questions were soon answered.

Two hours later, Wright and Magnus came clomping down the cell aisle, with Magnus holding his gun in Sheriff Jenk's back, fairly pushing the oldster ahead of him. Todd sat on the bunk and watched them, and Ann's .32 was stuck in his belt under his shirt.

"Open his cell," Magnus ordered.

"T' hades with you," Jenk snarled.

Magnus said no more; his gun rose, descended. The steel caught Jenk behind the ear, crushing his skull like a peanut. Jenk fell, and Magnus said: "Well, he'll never tell we killed this Price gent."

"What'd you mean?" Todd demanded.

"We're killin' you—you know too much."

Todd asked, "Are those Carter's orders?"

"What'd you think?" Wright growled.

Magnus took Jenk's .45 from holster, jacked out two good shells, dug in his pocket, came out with two empty .45 jackets, crammed them into the gun, then laid it beside Jenk's outstretched fingers.

"Make it look real," he grunted.

Todd got to his feet. He understood a lot

now. Carter had sent these two to kill him because Carter was afraid he'd talk some day about that train holdup; and Carter had given him a dummy gun. . . .

Magnus said, "When they fin' them two fired shells in Jenk's gun, they'll figger he killed Price tryin to bust jail. An' when they fin' Price with that .45 beside him, they'll figger he managed to club Jenk to death. . . ."

"Nice plan," Todd Price said. "There's only one thing wrong, gents."

"An' that?" Wright asked.

"I got two guns," Todd said, "an' one has good bullets."

Wright took a look at Todd's .32 and screamed, "He's heeled, Magnus!" And already Magnus' .45 was leaping from leather.

Magnus was grinning. He was ahead of Todd, way ahead; and then his grin died. For Todd's bullet, hastily but accurately fired, tore through Magnus' heart. Magnus turned, his gun bucking lead into the floor. His knees broke; he went down.

Wright was slow. Todd pivoted, his little gun level, and covered Wright. But before his hammer could drop, Wright had fired. Todd felt his shirt sleeve jerk, heard the bullet wham on the wall behind—then his .32 kicked flame and smoke.

Todd shot twice. Both bullets hit Wright in the chest. Wright screamed, dropped his gun, and sat down, his back to the wall.

"I've got enough, Price," he said.

Todd said, "Don't try to get your gun." He got on his knees, reached through the bars, got hold of the dead Jenk by the belt, pulled the body close, and took the cell keys from the large key-ring that Jenk carried. He unlocked the cell, and went out and knelt beside Wright.

"I'm goin' to die," Wright said.

Todd nodded.

Wright said, "Where'd you get that gun?"

"Duke Carter gave it to me," Todd lied.

Wright stared at him. "You lie," he

(Continued On Page 108)

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(Continued From Page 107)

declared. "Why would Carter give you that gun—he said he gave you an empty gun? He said he gave you a .45, an' that gun—An' you jus' said yourself you had two guns—"

"I lied," Todd said. "I only had one." He added, "An' Duke gave it to me."

Wright coughed. "You mean—he wanted you to kill me an' Magnus?"

Todd nodded. "He said you knew too much."

Wright cursed. "He said the same about you—he—"

Todd took a wild chance. "So Carter tried to kill me, huh?" He added, "You might jus' as well talk, Wright. Carter double-crossed you, too. That's why you're dyin' now with my bullets. . . ."

"The dirty dog," Wright said huskily.

Todd said softly, "Why not—?"

Wright repeated, "The dirty—" A spasm of coughing held him. He was dying, and he knew it. "I'll talk," he said.

HE told the whole story, his words coming with difficulty. He told how he had shot Todd, how Magnus had shot Johnny, how Carter had stolen Johnny's money. And then, as though very tired, he closed his eyes. His head lopped to one side, and he slowly slid until he lay on the floor, quiet and dead.

Todd got to his feet. He whirled suddenly, his gun level, as he realized, for the first time, that a man stood behind him. And that man was Johnny Webb!

Johnny's right shoulder was bandaged tightly, and he held a gun in his left hand, the barrel pointing idly at the floor. He had a bandage around his head, too, and his Stetson was perched on the back of his head.

"What you doin' here?" Todd demanded.

"I was comin' to see you," Johnny explained. "I got in the front door jus' as your shootin' party ended. I heard what Wright said."

"Well?"

(Continued On Page 110)

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(Continued From Page 108)

"Get Wright's .45," Johnny said. "That .32's too small for the work we got ahead of us, Todd."

Todd asked, "What work?"

"We're goin' over to the Ace Up," Johnny Webb said. "We're goin' clean out Duke Carter an' his gang."

Todd said, "You're not goin'!"

"Johnny grinned. "Why not?"

"Ann—she—"

"Fergit Ann," Johnny said. "How come you think I'm wearin' these bandages? Carter got Magnus to shoot me an' I'm payin' Carter back, by heaven!"

"No," Johnny maintained. "You got Ann to think about!"

Johnny said, "Fergit her!"

Johnny's voice held stubbornness. And Todd, from past experience, knew just how stubborn Johnny could get. Quickly he sized up the situation.

Johnny was crippled, but he had his gun out. Suddenly, without warning, Todd grabbed Johnny's gun arm, and, through sheer power, wrestled the gun from him. Then, with Johnny grunting protests, Todd shoved him in the cell, locked the door.

Todd panted, "I'll leave the cell keys in the office. Somebody'll come along an' let you out soon. Somebody in town musta heard this shootin'."

"I'll—I'll—" Johnny said.

Todd grinned, shoved Johnny's loaded gun in his belt, and left. A cold rage burning inside, he crossed the street, heading for the Ace Up. Suddenly, in the alley ahead, he heard two men approaching, and he ducked back in the darkness of a shed. Gun up, he waited.

His breath froze. One man, a shambling, heavy-gaited gent, was Ham Burke, a Carter killer. And the other man was Duke Carter!

They were going toward the jail. Todd knew, instantly, that they were worried about Magnus and Wright, and were going to investigate. Todd waited until they were past.

(Continued On Page 112)

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(Continued From Page 110)

Then he said, "Everything's okay at the jail, Duke."

The two whirled, hands taloned over holstered guns. Tense, they stood there, staring into the shadows that hid Todd.

Carter said, "That you, Wright."

Todd grinned. "This is Todd Price," he said softly.

"Who?" Carter demanded.

"You heard me," Todd said. He came out of the shadows, halted when fifteen feet separated him from the two killers—the gunmen who were now crouched, their eyes beady and hard. Todd added, "I killed Wright an' Magnus. . . ."

"Not with that .45 I gave you," Carter said.

"I'll thank you for that gun," Todd said drily, "when I send a bullet through your dirty heart, Carter."

Burke growled, "There's somethin' haywire here, Carter."

"Shut up!" Carter snapped. And then, without warning, Duke Carter went for his guns.

Todd let Duke get his guns free, then his own .45 sprewed flame. Duke jerked forward, his Colts spitting lead into the ground. Todd felt a crushing blow smash his shoulder, turning him. Dimly, he was aware that Ham Burke was firing.

Todd went to one knee. His gun spoke again, and Burke went down. He laid there, spread-out, ugly, and he was dead. Todd looked at Duke Carter.

But Carter, too, was dead.

TODD just kept kneeling there. Somewhere, he heard men hollering, and he heard boots pounding down the alley toward him. Todd summed it up in his mind. Carter was dead, and so was Magnus, and Wright, and Burke. . . .

Nobody, except himself, knew now he'd help rob the Limited, for Carter and the rest were dead. . . . Now Johnny Webb was helping Todd to his feet.

"What're you doin' here?" Todd asked.

"Jim Kirland let me out. He heard the shootin' in the jail. Are you—?"

Johnny never finished, for Ann Merritt pushed through the growing crowd. She put her arm around Todd and kissed him. "You hurt badly?" she asked.

Todd gulped. "Not much."

Ann kissed him again. "Oh, I'm so glad."

Todd's brain wheeled. He managed to say, "But you're engaged to Johnny!"

Ann held him close and whispered rapidly. Johnny Webb's homely face was beaming. Todd finally said, "An' it was all a frameup! You figgered that if you tol' me you aimed to marry Johnny it'd straighten me up—make me quit drinkin' an' gamblin'? So you two fixed it up between you?"

"That's it," Johnny affirmed.

"Holy Smoke," Todd Price said. He swore then never to drink again, or touch another card.

"But you will," Ann said.

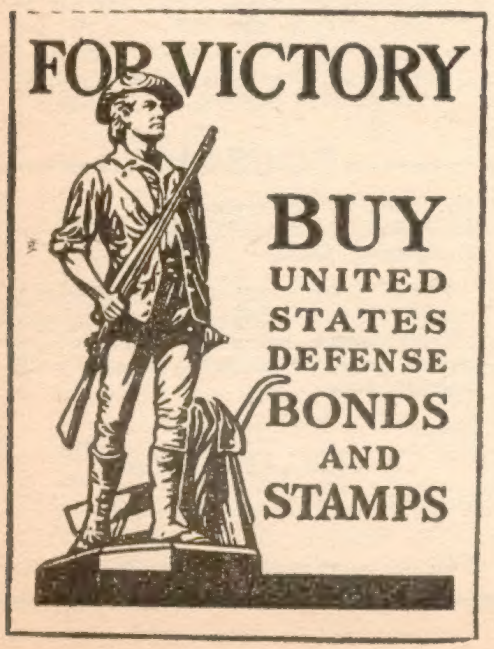
"You don't know me," Todd said. "You takin' me even if I keep on—"

"I sure will," Ann said.

That was too much for Todd. He sniffed the air suddenly. "Do I smell bacon cookin'?"

"That's from the Star Lunch," Ann said. "They're gettin' breakfast."

"Let's go eat," Todd Price said.



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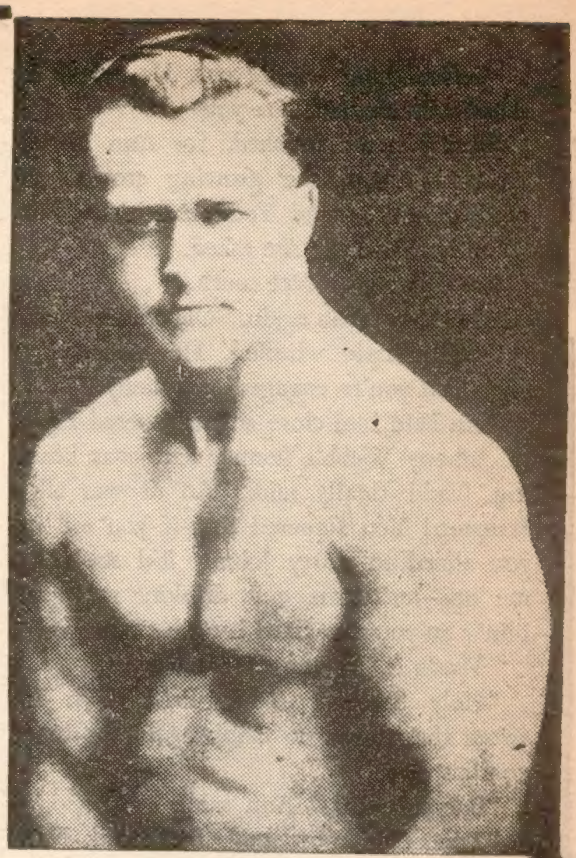

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